Film Quarterly

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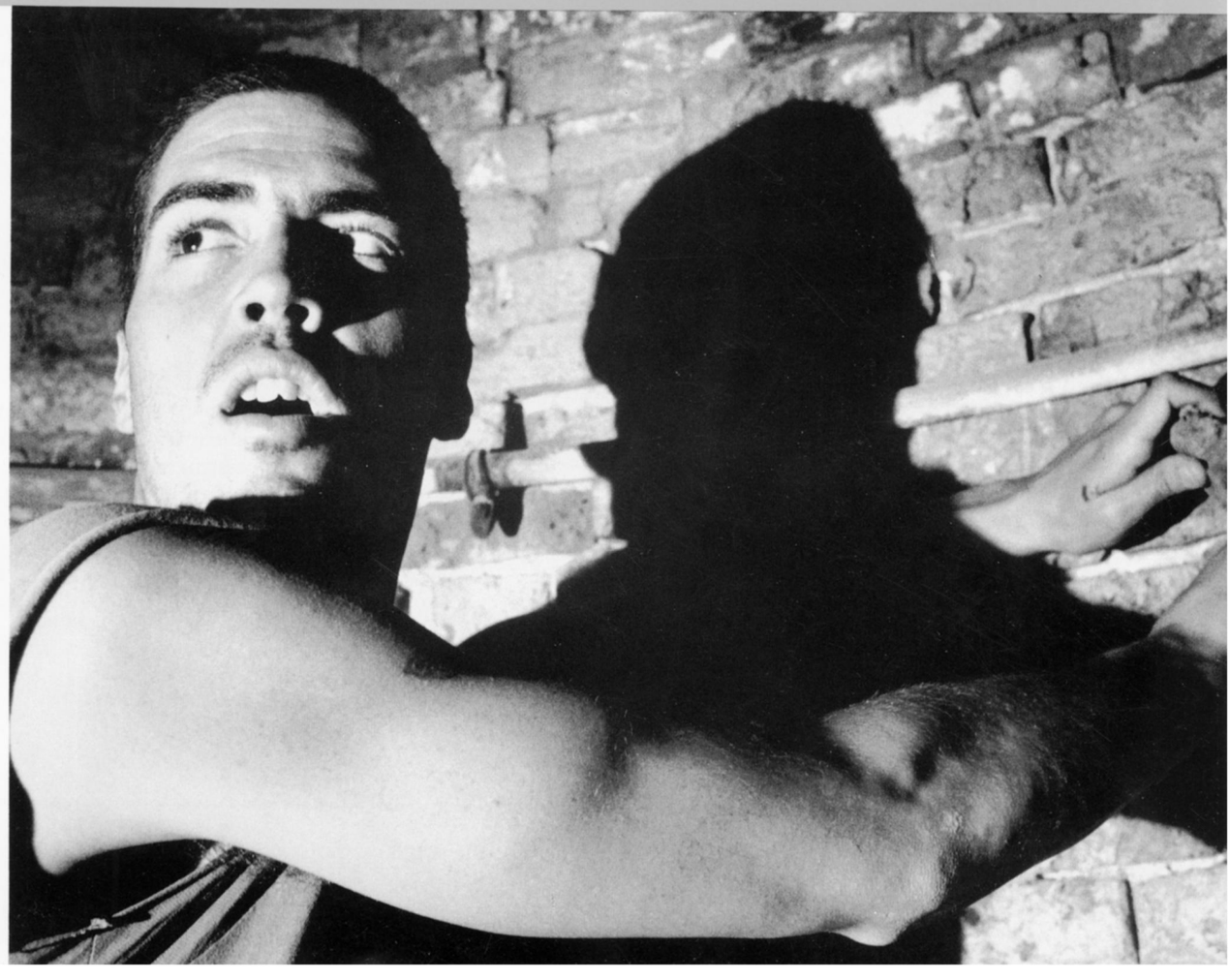
Todd Haynes: Cinematic/Sexual Transgression

Mirrors Without Memories—The New Documentary

Little Cinema of Horrors • Pedro Almodóvar

Dream of Light • *Fool's Fire* • *Unforgiven*



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Justin Wyatt
Cinematic/Sexual Transgression—An Interview with Todd Haynes 2

Linda Williams
Mirrors Without Memories—Truth, History, and the New Documentary 9

Gary Hentzi
Little Cinema of Horrors 22

Kathleen M. Vernon
Melodrama Against Itself: Pedro Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* 28

REVIEWS

William Johnson
Dream of Light 41

Robert M. Payne
Fool's Fire 45

Harvey R. Greenberg
Unforgiven 52

BOOK REVIEWS 57

Cover: (top) Veronica Forque as Cristal in Pedro Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* (see page 28); (bottom) James Lyons as Jack Bolton in Todd Haynes' *Poison* (see page 2).

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Justin Wyatt

Cinematic/Sexual

An Interview

Director Todd Haynes' fame rests on the cult status of his short film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* and on the Grand Jury prize at the 1991 Sundance Film Festival for his first feature, *Poison*. While these works are exciting and uncompromising, Haynes is probably better known within the mainstream press for the controversy surrounding the release of *Poison*: Reverend Donald Wildmon and his American Family Association launched a campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts based, in part, on Haynes' film, which had received a small completion grant from the NEA. Influenced by a misleading review in *Variety* and without having seen the film, Wildmon condemned *Poison* as pornography, in the process creating unexpected publicity for the film and probably leading to wider distribution than it might otherwise have had.

The name recognition, controversy, and the power of the film itself have all contributed to making Todd Haynes one of the major proponents of the "New Queer Cinema," a term coined in a 1992 *Village Voice* piece by B. Ruby Rich to describe the renaissance in gay and lesbian film-making represented by Haynes, Jennie Livingston (*Paris Is Burning*), Gus Van Sant (*My Own Private Idaho*), Tom Kalin (*Swoon*), Gregg Araki (*The Living End*), and Laurie Lynd (*R.S.V.P.*), among others.

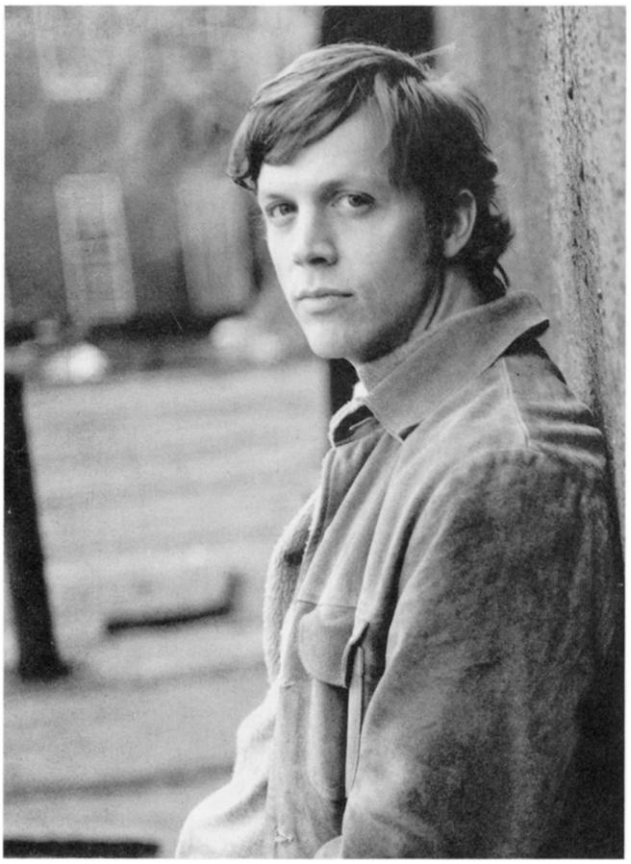
After graduating from Brown University's program in Art/Semiotics in 1985, Haynes co-founded Apparatus Productions with Barry Ellsworth and Christine Vachon (producer of both *Poison* and *Swoon*). Apparatus Productions was set up to channel grants to emerging film-makers who were not well served by the traditional funding sources. As Haynes comments, "We wanted to preserve the form of short film-making, and make it something really exciting that wasn't just a stepping stone for feature film-making." Under Apparatus, several films which directly question narrative and cinematic convention were completed, including *He Was Once* (Mary Hestand, 1990), *La Divina* (M. Brooke Dammkoehler, 1990), and *Oreos With Attitudes* (Larry Carty, 1991), (all currently distributed by Zeitgeist Films in New York).

In 1987, Haynes made *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story,* a mock documentary short telling the tragic tale of pop star Karen Carpenter's rise to fame and her eventual demise due to anorexia nervosa. Filmed entirely with a cast of Barbie and Ken dolls, the film moves from being a miniaturized star story to a moving depiction of a young woman overwhelmed by her family and patriarchal structures. The film problematizes character identification: while the audience may initially laugh at the family drama enacted by dolls, it is ultimately wrenched—by the death of a Barbie doll from an eating disorder. On another level, Haynes is interested in investigating the ideological power of pop icons, and, in fact, invokes the most saccharine icons of the 1960s and 1970s, Karen and Richard Carpenter, placing them amidst an array of other icons from the same period (Dionne Warwick, the Brady Bunch, and Olivia Newton-John, among others). Legal injunctions from the Carpenter family halted distribution of the film, although it has a strong life in the underground and remains a cult favorite.

Poison, produced on a Barbie-sized budget of $250,000 and also distributed by Zeitgeist, shifts, dramatically and aesthetically, between three developing stories: "Hero," a quasi-documentary about

Transgression

with Todd Haynes



patricide; "Horror," a black-and-white, broadly drawn horror/science-fiction parody about a scientist who becomes a leprous sex killer after ingesting the "sex drive" in liquid form; and "Homo," an elaborate homage to Jean Genet, telling of a prisoner's romance and obsession with a fellow inmate. In cutting between the three developing stories, Haynes forces the viewer to seek connections and resonances between each story and its characters: between the enigmatic child Richie Beacon, the alienated scientist Dr. Graves, and the resolute prisoner John Broom.

Haynes' choice of cutting between the stories runs the risk of destroying the viewers' attachment to and understanding of any one of them by shifting to the next. The outcome of this process is, however, central to Haynes' work. Indeed, as meaning is destabilized through this structure, the effect reflects the invisible center of *Poison*'s "documentary," Richie Beacon. The child, constructed through contradictory reports from the neighborhood "witnesses," remains an enigma. Just as the viewer begins to understand him, the definition of the character shifts; this process is repeated time and time again. For Haynes, the same shifting process operates through both *Poison* and *Superstar*, so that the films can be described as both camp and not, narrative and not, gay and not.

The experiments with narrative, character, and structure evident in *Superstar* and *Poison* promise to be continued in Haynes' next feature, *Safe*, scheduled to be filmed in the summer of 1993. *Safe* considers a middle-class housewife in the San Fernando Valley whose life is torn apart by an escalating chemical sensitivity. As Carol White starts reacting allergically to more and more elements within her environment, her ability to consume is increasingly diminished. This problem ultimately threatens the very structure of her identity and, of course, the audience's connection to the character. As Haynes describes it, "*Safe* is a film about danger, from the unthinkable dangers that communicate themselves through the objects and affections of our daily lives to the dangerous and misleading ways in which our identities are constructed."

Interview

JUSTIN WYATT: *Has your academic background had a bearing on your film-making practice?*

TODD HAYNES: In high school I had a teacher named Chris Adam. Chris had studied with Beverle Houston at USC and that was really important to her way of thinking about film. Chris showed a lot of experimental films in her classes, which was great. We saw James Benning, Stan Brakhage, Ken Jacobs, *Oh Dem Watermelons*, even the trash classics of early American avant-garde cinema.

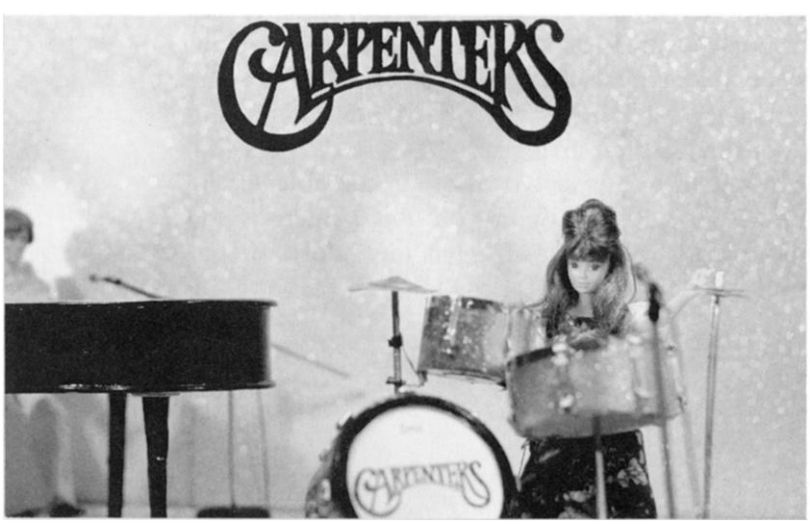
I remember that it was a big breakthrough for me when Chris Adam said, based on Beverle Houston's writings, that film is not reality. Reality can't be a criterion for judging the success or failure of a film, or its effect on you. It was a simple, but eye-opening, way of approaching film. You would go to these new Hollywood films and you would say, "It wasn't very realistic, that wasn't a very 'real' scene." This sense of real all the time was pervasive, very easy, and a completely accepted form of critiquing and analyzing what worked and what didn't work. But it wasn't a way of critiquing at all: it was really a way of enforcing very dominant ideas about the way we represent ourselves. So that approach was planted in my brain as a way of looking at film as completely constructed, and then trying to create different criteria for how to look at film.

I actually made my first real film in high school—with a crew and a big production. It was called *The Suicide*. We emulated the Hollywood practice of oppression: script girls and all the obligatory hierarchies and stuff. I was the co-producer. I wrote the story for a thesis exam in high school, and it's a film that actually is very similar to *Poison* in structure: it has all these different voices and intercuts all these different realities. We started to shoot it in tenth grade, and we worked on it for two years. The entire second year was devoted to the sound track. We started in Super-8, but by the end of the year we had blown up all the tracks to 35mm. We were able to use the Samuel Goldwyn studios to do our final mix through film brat kids' connections. We went in and did it right after *Barnaby Jones* and right before *The Last Waltz*. At the end, for our final party, we rented a theater in Westwood and somebody hired a limo to pick us up and take us to the theater. I was so disgusted with the whole thing that I vowed to make weird, experimental, personal films, with no sound, for a while. This idea continued to develop and become clearer throughout college.

At that time I was also very seriously into painting. A lot of people who know me from Brown probably think of me more as a painter than as a filmmaker. While studying film theory and getting pretty excited about it, and while painting and getting excited about that, I found that there was something very different about what could be expressed in painting versus what could be expressed in film. To me the difference was societal and political. It was a matter of using images and representation.

In a way, I felt that I had acquired a skill about representing things as a child. I would practice and practice —I would draw all the time. It was replication of what representation is. By the time I was in college and painting abstractly, I felt that these acquired representations were a weird burden that I carried. Just ignoring them would be a denial that I thought was important to address. In a way, I wanted to use these emblems, these images of the world that I had perfected: images of men, images of women, who look this way and look that way, that you can take apart to put on the canvas, and then take apart and discuss. But I kind of hated them, I hated representation, I hated narrative, and yet I felt that I had to deal with it, I *had* to. I thought that film was the most appropriate medium for an exploration of that idea.

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story



You've said that one of the reasons you made Superstar *was to experiment with questions of identification and to see whether audiences could become emotionally connected to these Barbie dolls. What did you learn from this experiment?*

I learned that people will identify at the drop of a hat [laughs] at almost anything. I think that it's an essential need when we go to a film, and a really exciting need to know about and not simply fulfill. There's this aspect of creating narratives in a commercial sense that I hate, and you see it in so many ways in movies over and over and over again: this need to create a likable central character with quirks and interesting things to say. It's like this awful sick need to replicate yourself and make a double in the creation of narrative. It's a horrible mirroring of the need to affirm who we are through stories and make ourselves big and huge on the screen. I hate it and yet, at a very basic level of narrative, I think that it happens. So I'm always caught in the dilemma of feeling that it's still absolutely necessary to work with stories, because they are a weird mechanical and emotional hybrid that we all react to. There is an incredible potential since people go in with expectations that you can meet part way, and then alter—because you have them, they're emotionally engaged.

Your experiments with genre, narrative, and character identification destabilize a lot of the traditional ways through which pleasure is derived from film. What do you think the relationship is between cinematic pleasure and style in your films?

I think that there is real stylistic play in both *Superstar* and *Poison*. In a way, it's the most on-the-surface example of the films' element of fun and play. I think in *Superstar*, more than in *Poison*, the way style is played with is what makes you laugh. It's this absurd miniaturization of the bourgeois success story, and you laugh at how all the obligatory elements of the 1970s family are miniaturized and present in the film and how it follows the genre of the star film with Barbie dolls. I think what is actually pleasurable about the film is the identification which you finally achieve with Karen through all the distancing. In a way, the play of style can be an alienation. You laugh, but you're not really interested in the story or the ideas or the emotions. It's not helping you identify with the film; in fact, it's keeping you outside of it in ways that provoke as much thought as the weird feeling of having identified with a plastic doll.

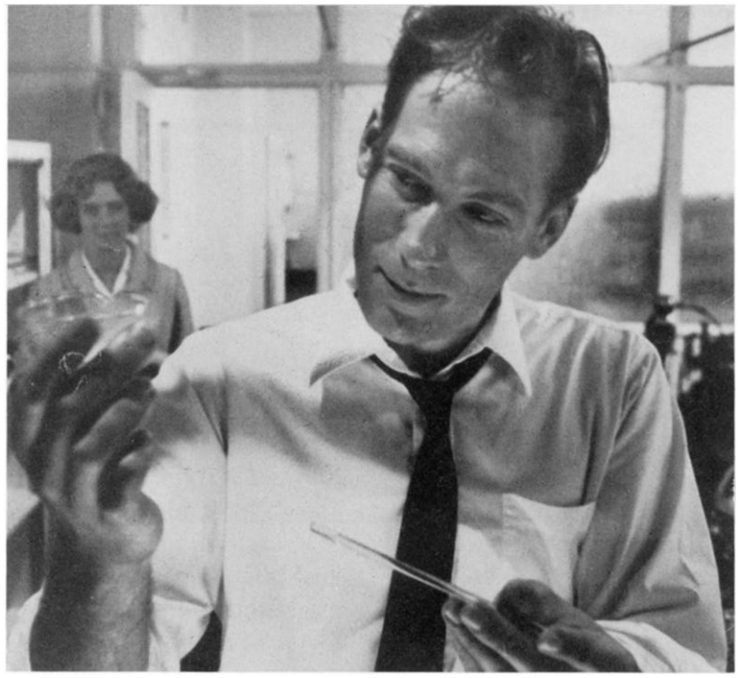
I think *Poison* works in different ways. Again, I think the style is the intercutting of disparate stories and that's the fun and it is funny at points. I don't know what's pleasurable about *Poison*, except something very sad, that is only pleasurable because it's hopefully truthful to people's experiences.

How interested are you in deconstructing generic frameworks? Poison *relies strongly on the documentary and horror genres, while* Superstar *could be read as an affliction movie or a star story.*

I don't know if the films are interested in deconstructing those genres as much as in referring to them, using common knowledge about them to talk about other things. The affliction movie gives the central character her identity through her disease

and all of a sudden that's supposed to be a complete identity when the disease is determined. In the star story, the star is the dual identity of success and fame, and then an evil element brings about the decline or fall.

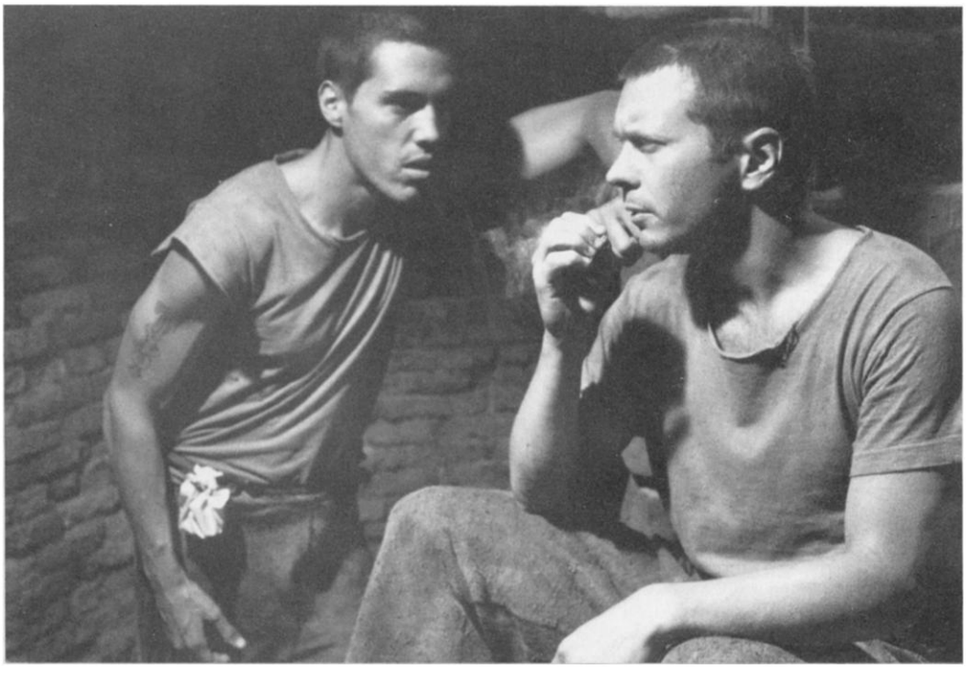
Similarly, in *Poison*, it's how all three of these genres or styles have a history of dealing with the notion of transgression and taking care of that threat in various ways. For a genre fan, maybe the film is really fun and fulfills all of those deconstructive and, at the same time, recuperative instincts. I just thought that the film needed to be in three different styles and that I wanted all the styles to relate to the central theme.



Larry Maxwell as Dr. Graves and Susan Norman as Dr. Nancy Olsen in the "Horror" story of *Poison*

But are you looking for an emotional response?

Yes, definitely. I think what makes *Poison* really work for some people is that it gets under your skin and makes you feel something . . . usually something very sad or disturbed. For other people, though, that doesn't happen. For some people, it's an intellectual game: it's just, "Oh, the documentary and the horror one are funny, and the other one is serious all the way through." In some sense, it's a very conventional, very mainstream, very Hollywood wish on my part that the film saddens you, and becomes more than what you're seeing—maybe by the end or by the last third. If it doesn't touch you in some way, if it ultimately doesn't overcome its structure, its intelligence, its cleverness, I would be unhappy.



Poison: James Lyons as Jack Bolton (left) and Scott Renderer as John Broom in "Homo"

What are your views on the argument of essentialism versus social constructionism in homosexuality? How does this influence your film-making?

Oh, a really easy question [laughs]. I tend to have a continued gut-level criticism that kicks in whenever essentialism is brought up. In a way it wasn't until gay theory was ushered in by people like Diana Fuss, identifying the essentialist versus social-constructivist perspectives, that I realized how significant and important feminism is. Gay theory as well, of course, but there's been so much more written about feminism. There's more of a multiplicity of perspectives around it. It was the first time that you had to acknowledge essential differences, not simply say that the whole idea of femininity and womanliness was solely a societal construct, that the traditions of femininity were imposed and constructed by men. To counter that with something else, a perspective that has to do with a not necessarily biologically different way of existing in the world, but a biological difference that creates social reaction and institutions—really interesting and complex ways of fighting these societally imposed notions of essential difference. . . .

With homosexuality and my films . . . I don't know that in *Poison* there is evidence for arguments of essential difference in homosexuality. Instead there is an attempt to link homosexuality to other forms that society is threatened by—deviance that threatens the status quo or our sense of what normalcy is. I don't believe that there is an essential gay sensibility either. What is so interesting about minorities identifying themselves historically and rewriting their own history is that, in a sense, it is an attempt to create an essential difference that isn't really true. But it's one that *they* are writing, as opposed to the status quo. So it's a way of disarming the conventions of difference that have been imposed on us and rewriting our own differences.

David Ehrenstein used as the headline for his review of Poison *in* The Advocate: "Poison *is the most important gay American film since* Mala Noche." *How do you feel about the film being appropriated in that way by gay culture?*

I think it's fine. The film is absolutely the result of AIDS and also a result of Genet. Obviously both of these facets are essential to gay history, to gay texts, and I think there are all kinds of ways that the film can be important to reexamining, at this particular point in history, being gay. To begin with I was just frustrated with this defensive, fearful acceptance of the terms that AIDS imposed on what being gay meant: provoking gay people to clean up their act and become unoffensive to society. All of a sudden there was this metaphor for homosexuality lurking, this awful, horrible metaphor of AIDS that had to be continually distinguished, and I think it *should* be distinguished, from homosexuality.

At the same time, what is so fascinating about Genet is that he was deeply interested in what was particularly transgressive, and *only* what was transgressive, about homosexuality—and what was erotic about it as well. That went along with the underground, disturbing, dark, and at times intense betrayal of lovers and trusted people that is hard for a lot of people, including myself, to deal with. I think Genet wrote about a strangely united political and erotic charge that he experienced with regard to homosexuality that was violent, that was based on upsetting the norm and not at all on finding a nice, safe place that society will give you.

Does that relate to your personal feelings about homosexuality?

Yes, definitely. I felt that it was so sad to be weak and apologetic about who we were as a result of AIDS when the fucking society was letting us die. So it was like, Look around, people don't give a shit about you. If the only power we have is the power to upset that norm, then let's use it and not try to iron it out. AIDS is inert, it doesn't have a brain, it doesn't choose, it's just the accident of a virus. Someone's sick joke has single-handedly affected all the disenfranchised, all the oppressed; it's the cruelest twist of fate. It gives so many people the ammunition to maintain things the way they are. That definitely inspired the film, and I feel that it is really important for gay people to look at it.

The concept of labeling seems really important to Poison: *the first scene with Broom being admitted to prison—centering on his acceptance of the label "homosexual," the ways in which the neighbors are*

bothered by Richie because they can't label him. Can you talk about how labeling structures the film?

It was something that I was definitely thinking about—from Genet, who so eloquently writes about how language provoked his violence more than anything. It was as though being called gay, thief, provoked the need to react, and in a sense reclaim those terms, make them uglier, more disturbing and abject than society could ever imagine. Maybe just being in possession of the labels was enough. It was the world that Genet could create to survive those years in prison and enjoy them as fully as he did.

I was really interested in the initial aspects of that—the whole idea of naming and branding people, and what traumas it provokes. Basically, I wanted to investigate the James Baldwin quote about the victim who can articulate his experience no longer being a victim. He has become the threat. So it's about articulation. That's the thing that gets these people: Richie is probably the most in control of anyone in the film, Broom learns how to speak, he is always able to articulate his desires, even if it is just to us. That's how they survive and also how they learn from their suffering. In a sense it's also why they seek out their experiences—there's something masochistic about that strain in Genet, and in *Poison* . . . absolutely. It's about accepting terms only in so far as you can use them and turn them back around.

What responsibilities, if any, do you feel you have being a film-maker who is gay?

I think that I should be creating positive images of homosexuality to spread around the world, on television, through the mass media to show people that gays are positive, they're just like them. That's my role. That's my job [laughs]. I am being sincere.

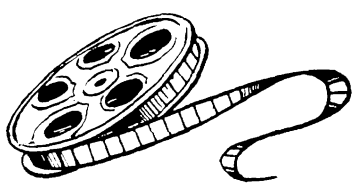
So you want to make a film like Making Love, *for example?*

. . . and *Lost Companion.* Is it *Lost Horizon* or *Lost Companion*? I get those fantasy things mixed up. "Let's imagine all the AIDS people returning at the end." Obviously, I have problems with the protocol of that. In fact, I have a lot of frustration with the insistence on content when people are talking about homosexuality. People define gay cinema solely by content: if there are gay characters in it, it's a gay film. It fits into the gay sensibility, we got it, it's gay. It's such a failure of the imagination, let alone the ability to look beyond content. I think that's really simplistic. Heterosexuality to me is a structure as much as it is a content. It is an imposed structure that goes along with the patriarchal, dominant structure that constrains and defines society. If homosexuality is the opposite or the counter-sexual activity to that, then what kind of a structure would it be? I think that it has been documented in film theory that conventional narrative form adheres to and supports basic ideological positions and structures in society and enforces heterosexual closure and romance in films. For me, it's the way the narrative is structured, the way that films are machines that either reiterate and reciprocate society—or not.

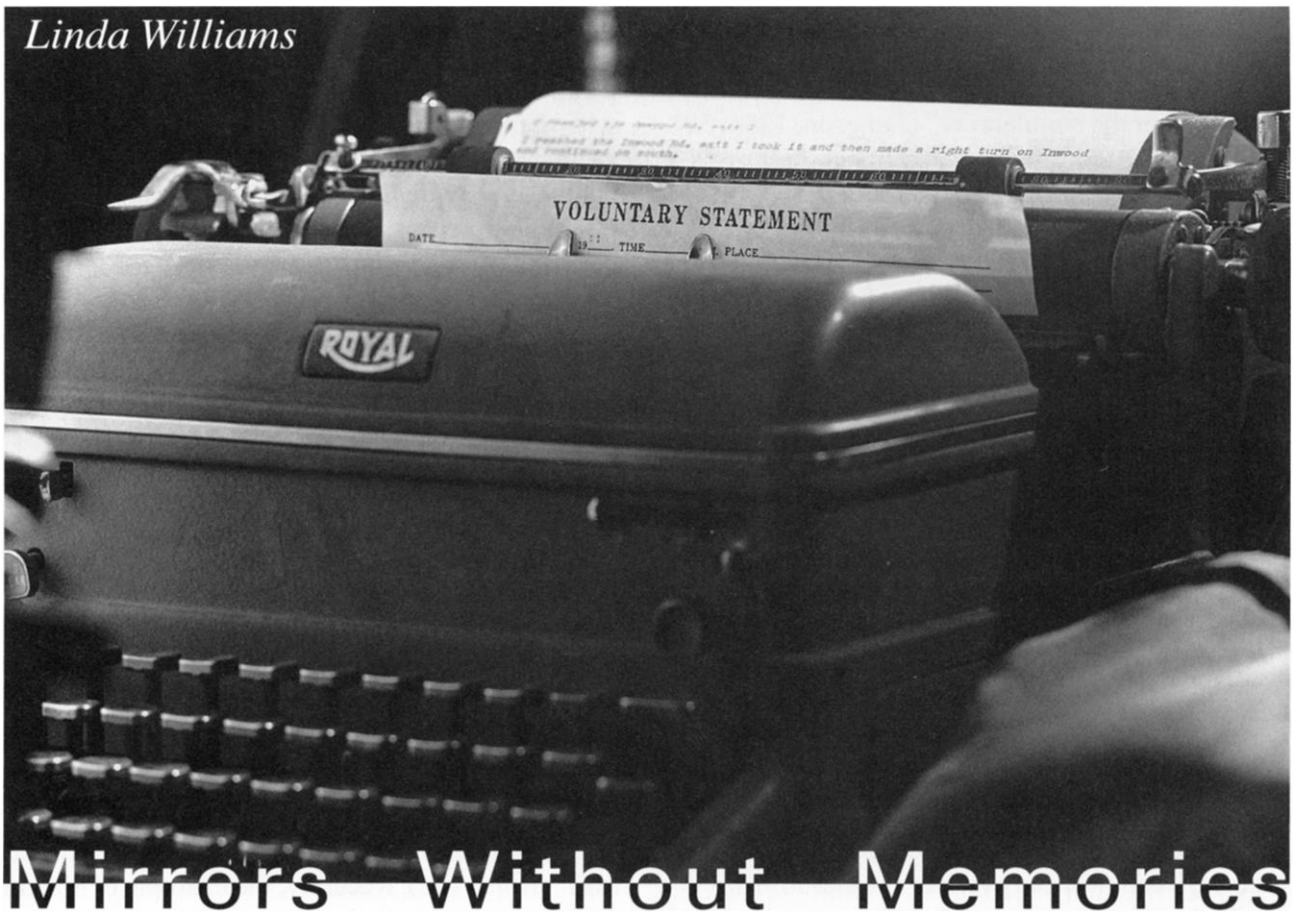
What are your feelings about those mainstream films concerning homosexuality?

I think that they're straight because of the structure. Most films don't experiment at all with narrative form, basically fitting a very conventional boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl structure. If you simply replace boy meets girl with boy meets boy, it's not really doing anything different at all. Of course, seeing two men kiss in a movie is important, but I think it needs more than that. That just replaces the content and pretends that the structure is natural. It's not as if the content has been determined by the form in the way it's being told to you. It's more exciting to think of revising, rethinking the ways that films are put together—the way you are positioned as a viewer, the way you are told to identify with characters or not, the way that the film is alive because of the work that you do as a viewer. It's really just a reflection on the wall otherwise.

■ Justin Wyatt is an Assistant Professor of Radio, Television, Film at the University of North Texas.



Linda Williams



Mirrors Without Memories

Truth, History, and the New Documentary

The August 12th, 1990 Arts and Leisure section of the *New York Times* carried a lead article with a rather arresting photograph of Franklin Roosevelt flanked by Winston Churchill and Groucho Marx. Standing behind them was a taut-faced Sylvester Stallone in his Rambo garb. The photo illustrated the major point of the accompanying article by Andy Grundberg: that the photograph—and by implication the moving picture as well—is no longer, as Oliver Wendell Holmes once put it, a "mirror with a memory" illustrating the visual truth of objects, persons, and events but a manipulated construction. In an era of electronic and computer-generated images, the camera, the article sensationally proclaims, "can lie."

In this photo, the anachronistic flattening out of historical referents, the trivialization of history itself, with the popular culture icons of Groucho and Rambo rubbing up against Roosevelt and Churchill, serves almost as a caricature of the state of representation some critics have chosen to call postmodern. In a key statement, Fredric Jameson has described

the "cultural logic of postmodernism" as a "new depthlessness, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary 'theory' and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (Jameson, 1984, 58). To Jameson, the effect of this image culture is a weakening of historicity. Lamenting the loss of the grand narratives of modernity, which he believes once made possible the political actions of individuals representing the interests of social classes, Jameson argues that it no longer seems possible to represent the "real" interests of a people or a class against the ultimate ground of social and economic determinations.

While not all theorists of postmodernity are as disturbed as Jameson by the apparent loss of the referent, by the undecidabilities of representation accompanied by an apparent paralysis of the will to change, many theorists do share a sense that the enlightenment projects of truth and reason are definitively over. And if representations, whether visual or verbal, no longer refer to a truth or referent "out there," as Trinh T. Minh-ha has put it, for us "in here" (Trinh, 83), then we seem to be plunged into a permanent state of the self-reflexive crisis of representation. What was once a "mirror with a memory" can now only reflect another mirror.

Perhaps because so much faith was once placed in the ability of the camera to reflect objective truths of some fundamental social referent—often construed by the socially relevant documentary film as records of injustice or exploitation of powerless common people—the loss of faith in the objectivity of the image seems to point, nihilistically, like the impossible memory of the meeting of the fictional Rambo and the real Roosevelt, to the brute and cynical disregard of ultimate truths.

Yet at the very same time, as any television viewer and moviegoer knows, we also exist in an era in which there is a remarkable hunger for documentary images of the real. These images proliferate in the vérité of on-the-scene cops programs in which the camera eye merges with the eye of the law to observe the violence citizens do to one another. Violence becomes the very emblem of the real in these programs. Interestingly, violent trauma has become the emblem of the real in the new vérité genre of the independent amateur video, which, in the case of George Holliday's tape of the Rodney King beating by L.A. police, functioned to contradict the eye of the law and to intervene in the "cops'" official version of King's arrest. This home video might be taken to represent the other side of the postmodern distrust of the image: here the camera tells the truth in a remarkable moment of cinema vérité which then becomes valuable (though not conclusive) evidence in accusations against the L.A. Police Department's discriminatory violence against minority offenders.

The contradictions are rich: on the one hand the postmodern deluge of images seems to suggest that there can be no a priori truth of the referent to which the image refers; on the other hand, in this same deluge, it is still the moving image that has the power to move audiences to a new appreciation of previously unknown truth.

In a recent book on postwar West German cinema and its representations of that country's past, Anton Kaes has written that "[T]he sheer mass of historical images transmitted by today's media weakens the link between public memory and personal experience. The past is in danger of becoming a rapidly expanding collection of images, easily retrievable but isolated from time and space, available in an eternal present by pushing a button on the remote control. History thus returns forever—as film" (Kaes, 198). Recently, the example of history that has been most insistently returning "as film" to American viewers is the assassination of John F. Kennedy as simulated by film-maker Oliver Stone.

Stone's *JFK* might seem a good example of Jameson's and Kaes's worst-case scenarios of the ultimate loss of historical truth amid the postmodern hall of mirrors. While laudably obsessed with exposing the manifest contradictions of the Warren Commission's official version of the Kennedy assassination, Stone's film has been severely criticized for constructing a "countermyth" to the Warren Commission's explanation of what happened. Indeed, Stone's images offer a kind of tragic counterpart to the comic mélange of the *New York Times* photo of Groucho and Roosevelt. Integrating his own reconstruction of the assassination with the famous Zapruder film, whose "objective" reflection of the event is offered as the narrative (if not the legal) clincher in Jim Garrison's argument against the lone assassin theory, Stone mixes Zapruder's real vérité with his own simulated vérité to construct a grandiose paranoid countermyth of a vast conspiracy by Lyndon Johnson, the C.I.A., and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to carry out a coup d'état. With little

Intervening in the process: *JFK* (previous photo: *The Thin Blue Line*)

hard evidence to back him up, Stone would seem to be a perfect symptom of a postmodern negativity and nihilism toward truth, as if to say: "We know the Warren Commission made up a story, well, here's another even more dramatic and entertaining story. Since we can't know the truth, let's make up a grand paranoid fiction."

It is not my purpose here to attack Oliver Stone's remarkably effective deployment of paranoia and megalomania; the press has already done a thorough job of debunking his unlikely fiction of a Kennedy who was about to end the Cold War and withdraw from Vietnam.[1] What interests me however, is the positive side of this megalomania: Stone's belief that it is possible to intervene in the process by which truth is constructed; his very real accomplishment in shaking up public perception of an official truth that closed down, rather than opened up, investigation; his acute awareness of how images enter into the production of knowledge. However much Stone may finally betray the spirit of his own investigation into the multiple, contingent, and constructed nature of the representation of history by asking us to believe in too tidy a conspiracy, his *JFK* needs to be taken seriously for its renewal of interest in one of the major traumas of our country's past.

So rather than berate Stone, I would like to contrast this multimillion-dollar historical fiction film borrowing many aspects of the form of documentary to what we might call the low-budget postmodern documentary borrowing many features of the fiction film. My goal in what follows is to get beyond the much remarked self-reflexivity and flamboyant auteurism of these documentaries, which might seem, Rashomon-like, to abandon the pursuit of truth, to what seems to me their remarkable engagement with a newer, more contingent, relative, postmodern truth—a truth which, far from being abandoned, still operates powerfully as the receding horizon of the documentary tradition.

When we survey the field of recent documentary films two things stand out: first, their unprecedented popularity among general audiences, who now line up for documentaries as eagerly as for fiction films; second, their willingness to tackle often grim, historically complex subjects. Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1987), about the murder of a police officer and the near execution of the "wrong man," Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), about the dire effects of General Motors' plant closings, and Ken Burns' 11-hour "The Civil War" (1990), (watched on PBS by 39 million Americans) were especially popular documentaries about uncommonly serious political and social realities. Even more difficult and challenging, though not quite as popular, were *Our Hitler* (Hans-Jürgen Sy-

berberg, 1980), *Shoah* (Claude Lanzmann, 1985), *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie* (Marcel Ophuls, 1987) and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (Chris Choy and Renee Tajima, 1988). And in 1991 the list of both critically successful and popular documentary features *not* nominated for Academy Awards—*Paris Is Burning* (Jennie Livingston), *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper), *35 Up* (Michael Apted), *Truth or Dare* (Alex Keshishian)—was viewed by many as an embarrassment to the Academy. *Village Voice* critic Amy Taubin notes that 1991 was a year in which four or five documentaries made it onto the *Variety* charts; documentaries now mattered in a new way (Taubin, 62).

Though diverse, all the above works participate in a new hunger for reality on the part of a public seemingly saturated with Hollywood fiction. Jennie Livingston, director of *Paris Is Burning*, the remarkably popular documentary about gay drag subcultures in New York, notes that the out-of-touch documentaries honored by the Academy all share an old-fashioned earnestness toward their subjects, while the new, more popular documentaries share a more ironic stance toward theirs. Coincident with the hunger for documentary truth is the clear sense that this truth is subject to manipulation and construction by docu-auteurs who, whether on camera (Lanzmann in *Shoah*, Michael Moore in *Roger and Me*) or behind, are forcefully calling the shots.[2]

It is this paradox of the intrusive manipulation of documentary truth, combined with a serious quest to reveal some ultimate truths, that I would like to isolate within a subset of the above films. What interests me particularly is the way a special few of these documentaries handle the problem of figuring traumatic historical truths inaccessible to representation by any simple or single "mirror with a memory," and how this mirror nevertheless operates in complicated and indirect refractions. For while traumatic events of the past are not available for representation by any simple or single "mirror with a memory"—in the vérité sense of capturing events as they happen—they do constitute a multifaceted receding horizon which these films powerfully evoke.

I would like to offer Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* as a prime example of this postmodern documentary approach to the trauma of an inaccessible past because of its spectacular success in intervening in the truths known about this past. Morris's film was instrumental in exonerating a man wrongfully accused of murder. In 1976, Dallas police officer Robert Wood was murdered, apparently by a 28-year-old drifter named Randall Adams. Like Stone's *JFK*, *The Thin Blue Line* is a film about a November murder in Dallas. Like *JFK*, the film argues that the wrong man was set up by a state conspiracy with an interest in convicting an easy scapegoat rather than prosecuting the real murderer. The film—the "true" story of Randall Adams, the man convicted of the murder of Officer Wood, and his accuser David Harris, the young hitchhiker whom Adams picked up the night of the murder—ends with Harris's cryptic but dramatic confession to the murder in a phone conversation with Errol Morris.

Stylistically, *The Thin Blue Line* has been most remarked for its film-noirish beauty, its apparent abandonment of cinema-vérité realism for studied, often slow-motion, and highly expressionistic reenactments of different witnesses' versions of the murder to the tune of Philip Glass's hypnotic score. Like a great many recent documentaries obsessed with traumatic events of the past, *The Thin Blue Line* is self-reflexive. Like many of these new documentaries, it is acutely aware that the individuals whose lives are caught up in events are not so much self-coherent and consistent identities as they are actors in competing narratives. As in *Roger and Me*, *Shoah*, and, to a certain extent, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*, the documentarian's role in constructing and staging these competing narratives thus becomes paramount.[3] In place of the self-obscuring voyeur of vérité realism, we encounter, in these and other films, a new presence in the persona of the documentarian.

For example, in one scene, David Harris, the charming young accuser whose testimony placed Randall Adams on death row and who has been giving his side of the story in alternate sections of the film from Adams, scratches his head while recounting an unimportant incident from his past. In this small gesture, Morris dramatically reveals information withheld until this moment: Harris's hands are handcuffed. He, like Adams, is in prison. The interviews with him are now subject to reinterpretation since, as we soon learn, he, too, stands accused of murder. For he has committed a senseless murder not unlike the one he accused Adams of committing. At this climactic moment Morris finally brings in

the hard evidence against Harris previously withheld: he is a violent psychopath who invaded a man's house, murdered him, and abducted his girlfriend. On top of this Morris adds the local cop's attempt to explain Harris's personal pathology; in the end we hear Harris's own near-confession—in an audio interview—to the murder for which Adams has been convicted. Thus Morris captures a truth, elicits a confession, in the best vérité tradition, but only in the context of a film that is manifestly staged and temporally manipulated by the docu-auteur.

It would seem that in Morris's abandonment of voyeuristic objectivity he achieves something more useful to the production of truth. His interviews get the interested parties talking in a special way. In a key statement in defense of his intrusive, self-reflexive style, Morris has attacked the hallowed tradition of cinema vérité: "There is no reason why documentaries can't be as personal as fiction filmmaking and bear the imprint of those who made them. Truth isn't guaranteed by style or expression. It isn't guaranteed by anything" (Morris, 17).

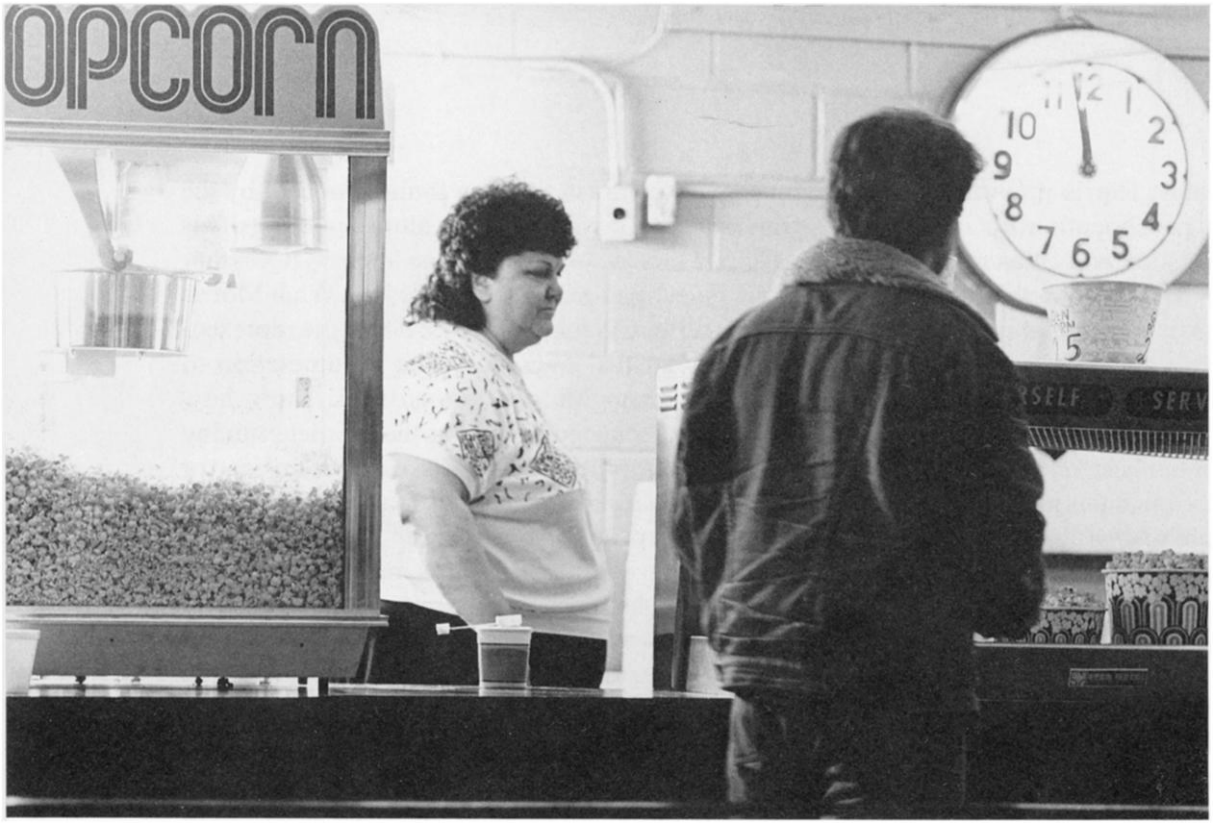
The "personal" in this statement has been taken to refer to the personal, self-reflexive style of the docu-auteur: Morris's hypnotic pace, Glass's music, the vivid colors and slow motion of the multiple reenactments. Yet the interviews too bear this personal imprint of the auteur. Each person who speaks to the camera in *The Thin Blue Line* does so in a confessional, "talking-cure" mode. James Shamus has pointed out that this rambling, free-associating discourse ultimately collides with, and is sacrificed to, the juridical narrative producing the truth of who, finally, is guilty. And Charles Musser also points out that what is sacrificed is the psychological complexity of the man the film finds innocent. Thus the film foregoes investigation into what Adams might have been up to that night taking a 16-year-old hitchhiker to a drive-in movie.[4]

Morris gives us some truths and withholds others. His approach to truth is altogether strategic. Truth exists for Morris because lies exist; if lies are to be exposed, truths must be strategically deployed against them. His strategy in the pursuit of this relative, hierarchized, and contingent truth is thus to find guilty those speakers whom he draws most deeply into the explorations of their past. Harris, the prosecutor Mulder, the false witness Emily Miller, all cozy up to the camera to remember incidents from their past which serve to indict them in the present. In contrast, the man found innocent by the film remains a cipher, we learn almost nothing of his past, and this lack of knowledge appears necessary to the investigation of the official lies. What Morris does, in effect, is partially close down the representation of Adams' own story, the accumulation of narratives from his past, in order to show how convenient a scapegoat he was to the overdetermining pasts of all the other false witnesses. Thus, instead of using fictionalizing techniques to show us the truth of what happened, Morris scrupulously sticks to stylized and silent docudrama reenactments that show only what each witness claims happened.

In contrast, we might consider Oliver Stone's very different use of docudrama reenactments to reveal the "truth" of the existence of several assassins and the plot that orchestrated their activity, in the murder of JFK. Stone has Garrison introduce the Zapruder film in the trial of Clay Shaw as hallowed vérité evidence that there had to be more than one assassin. Garrison's examination of the magic bullet's trajectory does a fine dramatic job of challenging the official version of the lone assassin. But in his zealous pursuit of the truth of "who dunnit," Stone matches the vérité style of the Zapruder film with a vérité simulation which, although hypothesis, has none of the stylized, hypothetical visual marking of Morris's simulations and which therefore commands a greater component of belief. Morris, on the other hand, working in a documentary form that now eschews vérité as a style, stylizes his hypothetical reenactments and never offers any of them as an image of what actually happened.

In the discussions surrounding the truth claims of many contemporary documentaries, attention has centered upon the self-reflexive challenge to once hallowed techniques of vérité. It has become an axiom of the new documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths—the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events. Yet too often this way of thinking has led to a forgetting of the way in which these films still are, as Stone's film isn't, documentaries—films with a special interest in the relation to the real, the "truths" which matter in people's lives but which cannot be transparently represented.

One reason for this forgetting has been the erection of a too simple dichotomy between, on the one hand, a naïve faith in the truth of what the



The Thin Blue Line

documentary image reveals—vérité's discredited claim to capturing events while they happen—and on the other, the embrace of fictional manipulation. Of course, even in its heyday no one ever fully believed in an absolute truth of cinema vérité. There are, moreover, many gradations of fictionalized manipulation ranging from the controversial manipulation of temporal sequence in Michael Moore's R*oger and Me* to Errol Morris's scrupulous reconstructions of the subjective truths of events as viewed from many different points of view.

Truth is "not guaranteed" and cannot be transparently reflected by a mirror with a memory, yet some kinds of partial and contingent truths are nevertheless the always receding goal of the documentary tradition. Instead of careening between idealistic faith in documentary truth and cynical recourse to fiction, we do better to define documentary not as an essence of truth but as a set of strategies designed to choose from among a horizon of relative and contingent truths. The advantage, and the difficulty, of the definition is that it holds on to the concept of the real—indeed of a "real" at all—even in the face of tendencies to assimilate documentary entirely into the rules and norms of fiction.

As *The Thin Blue Line* shows, the recognition that documentary access to this real is strategic and contingent does not require a retreat to a Rashomon universe of undecidabilities. This recognition can lead, rather, to a remarkable awareness of the conditions under which it is possible to intervene in the political and cultural construction of truths which, while not guaranteed, nevertheless matter as the narratives by which we live. To better explain this point I would like to further consider the confessional, talking-cure strategy of *The Thin Blue Line* as it relates to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. While I am aware of the incommensurability of a film about the state of Texas's near-execution of an innocent man with the German state's achieved extermination of six million, I want to pursue the comparison because both films are, in very different ways, striking examples of postmodern documentaries whose passionate desire is to intervene in the construction of truths whose totality is ultimately unfathomable.

In both of these films, the truth of the past is traumatic, violent, and unrepresentable in images. It is obscured by official lies masking the responsibility of individual agents in a gross miscarriage of justice. We may recall that Jameson's argument about the postmodern is that it is a loss of a sense of history, of a collective or individual past, and the knowledge of how the past determines the present: "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (Jameson, 1984, 64). That so many well-known and popular documentary films have taken up the task of remembering the past—indeed that so much popular debate about the "truth"

of the past has been engendered by both fiction and documentary films about the past—could therefore be attributed to another of Jameson's points about the postmodern condition: the intensified nostalgia for a past that is already lost.

However, I would argue instead that, certainly in these two films and partially in a range of others, the postmodern suspicion of over-abundant images of an unfolding, present "real" (vérité's commitment to film "it" as "it" happens) has contributed not to new fictionalizations but to paradoxically new historicizations. These historicizations are fascinated by an inaccessible, ever receding, yet newly important past which does have depth.[5] History, in Jameson's sense of traces of the past, of an absent cause which "hurts" (Jameson, 1981, 102), would seem, almost by definition, to be inaccessible to the vérité documentary form aimed at capturing action in its unfolding. The recourse to talking-heads interviews, to people remembering the past—whether the collective history of a nation or city, the personal history of individuals, or the criminal event which crucially determines the present—is, in these anti-vérité documentaries, an attempt to overturn this commitment to realistically record "life as it is" in favor of a deeper investigation of how it became as it is.

Thus, while there is very little running after the action, there is considerable provocation of action. Even though Morris and Lanzmann have certainly done their legwork to pursue actors in the events they are concerned to represent, their preferred technique is to set up a situation in which the action will come to them. In these privileged moments of vérité (for there finally are moments of relative vérité) the past repeats. We thus see the power of the past not simply by dramatizing it, or reenacting it, or talking about it obsessively (though these films do all this), but finally by finding its traces, in repetitions and resistances, in the present. It is thus the contextualization of the present with the past that is the most effective representational strategy in these two remarkable films.

Each of these documentaries digs toward an impossible archeology, picking at the scabs of lies which have covered over the inaccessible originary event. The film-makers ask questions, probe circumstances, draw maps, interview historians, witnesses, jurors, judges, police, bureaucrats, and survivors. These diverse investigatory processes augment the single method of the vérité camera. They seek to uncover a past the knowledge of which will produce new truths of guilt and innocence in the present. Randall Adams is now free at least partly because of the evidence of Morris's film; the Holocaust comes alive not as some alien horror foreign to all humanity but as something that is, perhaps for the first time on film, understandable as an absolutely banal incremental logic and logistics of train schedules and human silence. The past events examined in these films are not offered as complete, totalizable, apprehensible. They are fragments, pieces of the past invoked by memory, not unitary representable truths but, as Freud once referred to the psychic mechanism of memory, a palimpsest, described succinctly by Mary Ann Doane as "the sum total of its rewritings through time." The "event" remembered is never whole, never fully represented, never isolated in the past alone but only accessible through a memory which resides, as Doane has put it, "in the reverberations between events" (Doane, 58).

This image of the palimpsest of memory seems a particularly apt evocation of how these two films approach the problem of representing the inaccessible trauma of the past. When Errol Morris fictionally reenacts the murder of Officer Wood as differently remembered by David Harris, Randall Adams, the officer's partner, and the various witnesses who claimed to have seen the murder, he turns his film into a temporally elaborated palimpsest, discrediting some versions more than others but refusing to ever fix one as *the* truth. It is precisely Morris's refusal to fix the final truth, to go on seeking reverberations and repetitions that, I argue, gives this film its exceptional power of truth.

This strategic and relative truth is often a by-product of other investigations into many stories of self-justification and reverberating memories told to the camera. For example, Morris never set out to tell the story of Randall Adams' innocence. He was interested initially in the story of "Dr. Death," the psychiatrist whose testimony about the sanity of numerous accused murderers had resulted in a remarkable number of death sentences. It would seem that the more directly and singlemindedly a film pursues a single truth, the less chance it has of producing the kind of "reverberations between events" that will effect meaning in the present. This is the problem with *Roger and Me* and, to stretch matters, even with *JFK*: both go after a single target

too narrowly, opposing a singular (fictionalized) truth to a singular official lie.

The much publicized argument between Harlan Jacobson and Michael Moore regarding the imposition of a false chronology in Moore's documentary about the closing of General Motors' plant in Flint, Michigan, is an example. At stake in this argument is whether Moore's documentation of the decline of the city of Flint in the wake of the plant closing entailed an obligation to represent events in the sequence in which they actually occurred. Jacobson argues that Moore betrays his journalist/documentarian's commitment to the objective portrayal of historical fact when he implies that events that occurred prior to the major layoffs at the plant were the effect of these layoffs. Others have criticized Moore's self-promoting placement of himself at the center of the film.[6]

In response, Moore argues that as a resident of Flint he has a place in the film and should not attempt to play the role of objective observer but of partisan investigator. This point is quite credible and consistent with the postmodern awareness that there is no objective observation of truth but always an interested participation in its construction. But when he argues that his documentary is "in essence" true to what happened to Flint in the 1980s, only that these events are "told with a narrative style" that omits details and condenses events of a decade into a palatable "movie" (Jacobson, 22), Moore behaves too much like Oliver Stone, abandoning the commitment to multiple contingent truths in favor of a unitary, paranoid view of history.

The argument between Moore and Jacobson seems to be about where documentarians should draw the line in manipulating the historical sequence of their material. But rather than determining appropriate strategies for the representation of the meaning of events, the argument becomes a question of a commitment to objectivity versus a commitment to fiction. Moore says, in effect, that his first commitment is to entertain and that this entertainment is faithful to the essence of the history. But Moore betrays the cause and effect reverberation between events by this reordering. The real lesson of this debate would seem to be that Moore did not trust his audience to learn about the past in any other way than through the vérité capture of it. He assumed that if he didn't have footage from the historical period prior to his filming in Flint he couldn't show it. But the choice needn't be, as Moore implies, between boring, laborious fact and entertaining fiction true to the "essence," but not the detail, of historical events. The opposition poses a

Roger and Me

false contrast between a naïve faith in the documentary truth of photographic and filmic images and the cynical awareness of fictional manipulation.

What animates Morris and Lanzmann, by contrast, is not the opposition between absolute truth and absolute fiction but the awareness of the final inaccessibility of a moment of crime, violence, trauma, irretrievably located in the past. Through the curiosity, ingenuity, irony, and obsessiveness of "obtrusive" investigators, Morris and Lanzmann do not so much represent this past as they reactivate it in images of the present. This is their distinctive postmodern feature as documentarians. For in revealing the fabrications, the myths, the frequent moments of scapegoating when easy fictional explanations of trauma, violence, crime were substituted for more difficult ones, these documentaries do not simply play off truth against lie, nor do they play off one fabrication against another; rather, they show how lies function as partial truths to both the agents and witnesses of history's trauma.

For example, in one of the most discussed moments of *Shoah*, Lanzmann stages a scene of homecoming in Chelmno, Poland, by Simon Srebnik, a Polish Jew who had, as a child, worked in the death camp near that town, running errands for the Nazis and forced to sing while doing so. Now, many years later, in the present tense of Lanzmann's film, the elderly yet still vigorous Srebnik is surrounded on the steps of the Catholic church by an even older, friendly group of Poles who remembered him as a child in chains who sang by the river. They are happy he has survived and returned to visit. But as Lanzmann asks them how much they knew and understood about the fate of the Jews who were carried away from the church in gas vans, the group engages in a kind of free association to explain the unexplainable.

[Lanzmann] Why do they think all this happened to the Jews?

[A Pole] Because they were the richest! Many Poles were also exterminated. Even priests.

[Another Pole] Mr. Kantarowski will tell us what a friend told him. It happened in Myndjewyce, near Warsaw.

[Lanzmann] Go on.

[Mr. Kantarowski] The Jews there were gathered in a square. The rabbi asked an SS man: "Can I talk to them?" The SS man said yes. So the rabbi said that around two thousand years ago the Jews condemned the innocent Christ to death. And when they did that, they cried out: "Let his blood fall on our heads and on our sons' heads." The rabbi told

Shoah: Simon Srebnik on the church steps in Chelmno

them: "Perhaps the time has come for that, so let us do nothing, let us go, let us do as we're asked."

[Lanzmann] He thinks the Jews expiated the death of Christ?

[The first? Pole] He doesn't think so, or even that Christ sought revenge. He didn't say that. The rabbi said it. It was God's will, that's all!

[Lanzmann, referring to an untranslated comment] What'd she say?

[A Polish woman] So Pilate washed his hands and said: "Christ is innocent," and he sent Barabbas. But the Jews cried out: "Let his blood fall on our heads!"

[Another Pole] That's all; now you know! (*Shoah*, 100).[7]

As critic Shoshana Felman has pointed out, this scene on the church steps in Chelmno shows the Poles replacing one memory of their own witness of the persecution of the Jews with another (false) memory, an auto-mystification, produced by Mr. Kantarowski, of the Jews' willing acceptance of their persecution as scapegoats for the death of Christ. This fantasy, meant to assuage the Poles' guilt for their complicity in the extermination of the Jews, actually repeats the Poles' crime of the past in the present.

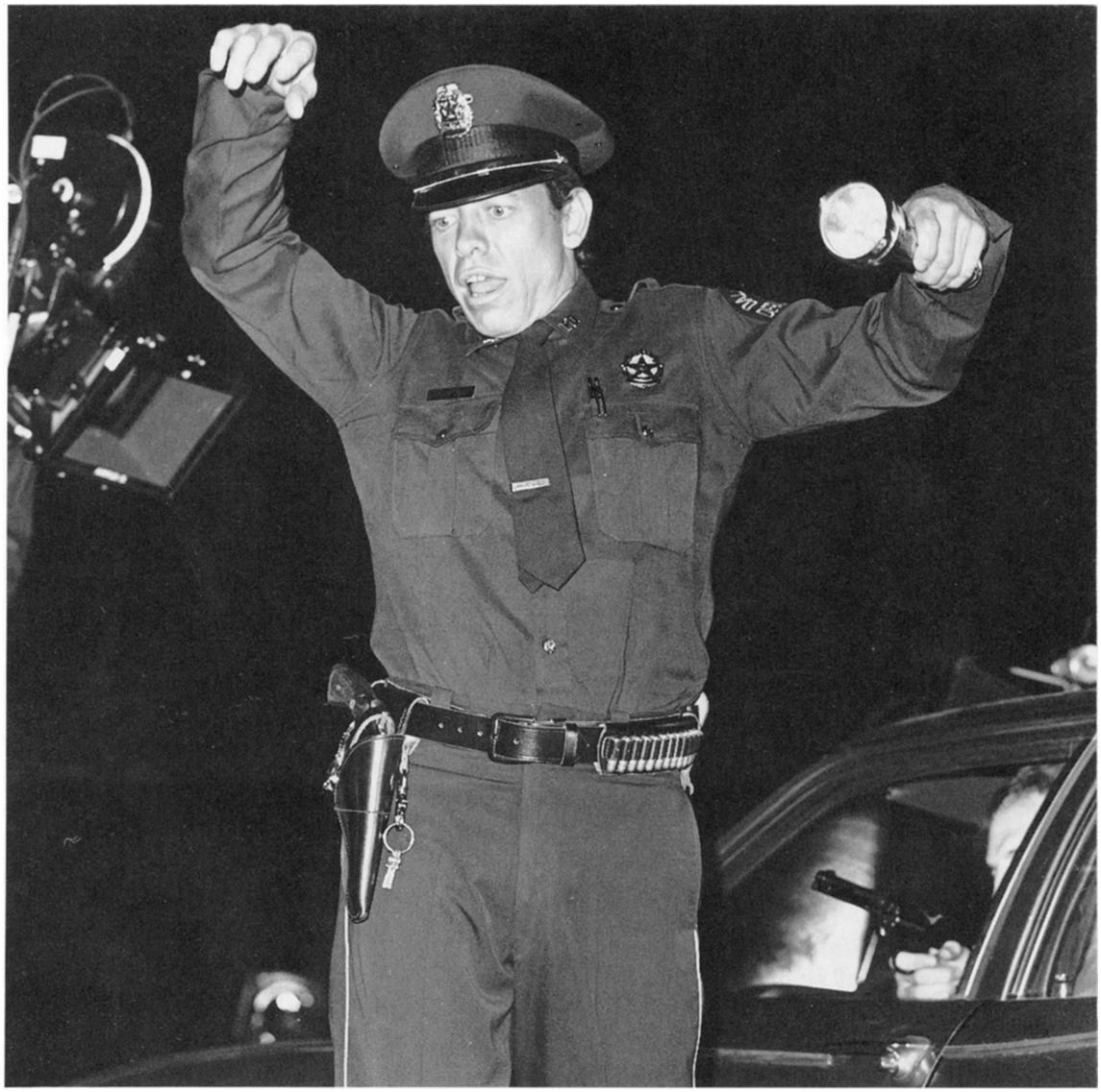
Felman argues that the strategy of Lanzmann's film is not to challenge this false testimony but to dramatize its effects: we see Simon Srebnik suddenly silenced among the chatty Poles, whose victim he becomes all over again. Thus the film does not so much give us a memory as an action, here and now, of the Poles' silencing and crucifixion of Srebnik, whom they obliterate and forget even as he stands in their midst (Felman, 120–128).

It is this repetition in the present of the crime of the past that is key to the documentary process of Lanzmann's film. Success, in the film's terms, is the ability not only to assign guilt in the past, to reveal and fix a truth of the day-to-day operation of the machinery of extermination, but also to deepen the understanding of the many ways in which the Holocaust continues to live in the present. The truth of the Holocaust thus does not exist in any totalizing narrative, but only, as Felman notes and Lanzmann shows, as a collection of fragments. While the process of scapegoating, of achieving premature narrative closure by assigning guilt to convenient victims, is illuminated, the events of the past—in this case the totality of the Holocaust—register not in any fixed moment of past or present but rather, as in Freud's description of the palimpsest, as the sum total of its rewritings through time, not in a single event but in the "reverberations" between.

It is important in the above example to note that while cinema vérité is deployed in this scene on the steps, as well as in the interviews throughout the film, this form of vérité no longer has a fetish function of demanding belief as the whole. In place of a truth that is "guaranteed," the vérité of catching events as they happen is here embedded in a history, placed in relation to the past, given a new power, not of absolute truth but of repetition.

Although it is a very different sort of documentary dealing with a trauma whose horror cannot be compared to the Holocaust, Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* also offers its own rich palimpsest of reverberations between events. At the beginning of the film, convicted murderer Randall Adams mulls over the fateful events of the night of 1976 when he ran out of gas, was picked up by David Harris, went to a drive-in movie, refused to allow Harris to come home with him, and later found himself accused of killing a cop with a gun that Harris had stolen. He muses: "Why did I meet this kid? Why did I run out of gas? But it happened, it happened." The film probes this "Why?" And its discovery "out of the past" is not simply some fate-laden accident but, rather, a reverberation between events that reaches much further back into the past than that cold November night in Dallas.

Toward the end, after Morris has amassed a great deal of evidence attesting to the false witness born by three people who testified to seeing Randall Adams in the car with David Harris, but before playing the audio tape in which Harris all but confesses to the crime, the film takes a different turn—away from the events of November and into the childhood of David Harris. The film thus moves both forward and back in time: to events following and preceding the night of November, 1976, when the police officer was shot. Moving forward, we learn of a murder, in which David broke into the home of a man who had, he felt, stolen his girlfriend. When the man defended himself, David shot him. This repetition of wanton violence is the clincher in the film's "case" against David. But instead of stopping there, the film goes back in time as well.



The Thin Blue Line: reenactment of the night in November, 1976

A kindly, baby-faced cop from David's home town, who has told us much of David's story already, searches for the cause of his behavior and hits upon a childhood trauma: a four-year-old brother who drowned when David was only three. Morris then cuts to David speaking of this incident: "My Dad was supposed to be watching us. . . . I guess that might have been some kind of traumatic experience for me. . . . I guess I reminded him . . . it was hard for me to get any acceptance from him after that. . . . A lot of the things I did as a young kid was an attempt to get back at him."

In itself, this "getting-back-at-the-father" motive is something of a cliché for explaining violent male behavior. But coupled as it is with the final "confession" scene in which Harris repeats this getting-back-at-the-father motive in his relation to Adams, the explanation gains resonance, exposing another layer in the palimpsest of the past. As we watch the tape recording of this last unfilmed interview play, we hear Morris ask Harris if he thinks Adams is a "pretty unlucky fellow?" Harris answers, "Definitely," specifying the nature of this bad luck: "Like I told you a while ago about the guy who didn't have no place to stay . . . if he'd had a place to stay, he'd never had no place to go, right?" Morris decodes this question with his own rephrasing, continuing to speak of Harris in the third person: "You mean if he'd stayed at the hotel that night this never would have happened?" (That is, if Adams had invited Harris into his hotel to stay with him as Harris had indicated earlier in the film he expected, then Harris would not have committed the murder he later pinned on Adams.) Harris: "Good possibility, good possibility. . . . You ever hear of the proverbial scapegoat? There probably been thousands of innocent people convicted. . . . "

Morris presses: "What do you think about whether he's innocent?" Harris: "I'm sure he is." Morris again: "How can you be sure?" Harris: "I'm the one who knows. . . . After all was said and done it was pretty unbelievable. I've always thought if you could say why there's a reason that Randall Adams is in jail it might be because he didn't have

a place for somebody to stay that helped him that night. It might be the only reason why he's at where he's at."

What emerges forcefully in this near-confession is much more than the clinching evidence in Morris's portrait of a gross miscarriage of justice. For in not simply probing the "wrong man" story, in probing the reverberations between events of David Harris's personal history, Morris's film discovers an underlying layer in the palimpsest of the past: how the older Randall Adams played an unwitting role in the psychic history of the 16-year-old David Harris, a role which repeated an earlier trauma in Harris's life: of the father who rejected him, whose approval he could not win, and upon whom David then revenged himself.

Harris's revealing comments do more than clinch his guilt. Like the Poles who surround Srebnik on the steps of the church and proclaim pity for the innocent child who suffered so much even as they repeat the crime of scapegoating Jews, so David Harris proclaims the innocence of the man he has personally condemned, patiently explaining the process of scapegoating that the Dallas county legal system has so obligingly helped him accomplish. Cinema vérité in both these films is an important vehicle of documentary truth. We witness in the present an event of simultaneous confession and condemnation on the part of historical actors who repeat their crimes from the past. Individual guilt is both palpably manifest and viewed in a larger context of personal and social history. For even as we catch David Harris and the Poles of Chelmno in the act of scapegoating innocent victims for crimes they have not committed, these acts are revealed as part of larger processes, reverberating with the past.

I think it is important to hold on to this idea of truth as a fragmentary shard, perhaps especially at the moment we as a culture have begun to realize, along with Morris, and along with the supposed depthlessness of our postmodern condition, that it is not guaranteed. For some form of truth is the always receding goal of documentary film. But the truth figured by documentary cannot be a simple unmasking or reflection. It is a careful construction, an intervention in the politics and the semiotics of representation.

An overly simplified dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the root of our difficulty in thinking about the truth in documentary. The choice is not between two entirely separate regimes of truth and fiction. The choice, rather, is in strategies of fiction for the approach to relative truths. Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it. But documentary can and should use all the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths. What we see in *The Thin Blue Line* and *Shoah*, and to some degree in the other documentaries I have mentioned, is an interest in constructing truths to dispel pernicious fictions, even though these truths are only relative and contingent. While never absolute and never fixed, this under-construction, fragmented horizon of truth is one important means of combating the pernicious scapegoating fictions that can put the wrong man on death row and enable the extermination of a whole people.

The lesson that I would like to draw from these two exemplary postmodern documentaries is thus not at all that postmodern representation inevitably succumbs to a depthlessness of the simulacrum, or that it gives up on truth to wallow in the undecidabilities of representation. The lesson, rather, is that there can be historical depth to the notion of truth—not the depth of unearthing a coherent and unitary past, but the depth of the past's reverberation with the present. If the authoritative means to the truth of the past does not exist, if photographs and moving images are not mirrors with memories, if they are more, as Baudrillard has suggested, like a hall of mirrors, then our best response to this crisis of representation might be to do what Lanzmann and Morris do: to deploy the many facets of these mirrors to reveal the seduction of lies.

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Notes

I owe thanks to Anne Friedberg, Mark Poster, Nancy Salzer, Marita Sturken, Charles Musser, James Shamus, B. Ruby Rich, and Marianne Hirsch for helping me, one way or another, to formulate the ideas in this article. I also thank my colleagues on the *Film Quarterly* editorial board, whose friendly criticisms I have not entirely answered.

1. See, for example: Janet Maslin, "Oliver Stone Manipulates His Puppet," *New York Times* (Sunday, January 5, 1992), p. 13; "Twisted History," *Newsweek* (December 23, 1991),

pp. 46–54; Alexander Cockburn, "J.F.K. and *J.F.K.*," *The Nation* (January 6–13, 1992), pp. 6–8.

2. Livingston's own film is an excellent example of the irony she cites, not so much in her directorial attitude toward her subject—drag-queen ball competitions—but in her subjects' attitudes toward the construction of the illusion of gender.
3. In this article I will not discuss *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* or *Roger and Me* at much length. Although both of these films resemble *The Thin Blue Line* and *Shoah* in their urge to reveal truths about crimes, I do not believe these films succeeded as spectacularly as Lanzmann's and Morris's in respecting the complexity of these truths. In *Vincent Chin,* the truth pursued is the racial motives animating Roger Ebans, a disgruntled, unemployed auto worker who killed Vincent Chin in a fight following a brawl in a strip joint. Ebans was convicted of manslaughter but only paid a small fine. He was then acquitted of a subsequent civil rights charge that failed to convince a jury of his racial motives. The film, however, convincingly pursues evidence that Ebans' animosity towards Chin was motivated by his anger at the Japanese for stealing jobs from Americans (Ebans assumed Chin was Japanese). In recounting the two trials, the story of the "Justice for Vincent" Committee, and the suffering of Vincent's mother, the film attempts to retry the case showing evidence of Ebans' racial motives.

   Film-makers Choy and Tajima gamble that their camera will capture, in interviews with Ebans, what the civil rights case did not capture for the jury: the racist attitudes that motivated the crime. They seek, in a way, what all of these documentaries seek: evidence of the truth of past events through their repetition in the present. This is also, in a more satirical vein, what Michael Moore seeks when he repeatedly attempts to interview the elusive Roger Smith, head of General Motors, about the layoffs in Flint, Michigan: Smith's avoidance of Moore repeats this avoidance of responsibility toward the town of Flint. This is also what Claude Lanzmann seeks when he interviews the ex-Nazis and witnesses of the Holocaust, and it is what Errol Morris seeks when he interviews David Harris, the boy who put Randall Adams on death row. Each of these films succeeds in its goal to a certain extent. But the singlemindedness of *Vincent Chin*'s pursuit of the singular truth of Ebans' guilt, and his culture's resentment of Asians, limits the film. Since Ebans never does show himself in the present to be a blatant racist, but only an insensitive working-class guy, the film interestingly fails on its own terms, though it is eloquent testimony to the pain and suffering of the scapegoated Chin's mother.
4. Shamus, Musser, and I delivered papers on *The Thin Blue Line* at a panel devoted to the film at a conference sponsored by New York University, "The State of Representation: Representation and the State," October 26–28, 1990. B. Ruby Rich was a respondent. Musser's paper argued the point, seconded by Rich's comments, that the prosecution and the police saw Adams as a homosexual. Their eagerness to prosecute Adams, rather than the underage Harris, seems to have much to do with this perception, entirely suppressed by the film.
5. Consider, for example, the way Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March,* on one level a narcissistic self-portrait of an eccentric Southerner's rambling attempts to discover his identity while traveling through the South, also plays off against the historical General Sherman's devastating march. Or consider the way Ken Burns' "The Civil War" is as much about what the Civil War is to us today as it is about the objective truth of the past.
6. Laurence Jarvik, for example, argued that Moore's self-portrayal of himself as a "naïve, quixotic 'rebel with a mike'" is not an authentic image but one Moore has promoted as a fiction (quoted in Tajima, 30).
7. I have quoted this dialogue from the published version of the *Shoah* script but I have added the attribution of who is speaking in brackets. It is important to note, however, that the script is a condensation of a prolonged scene that appears to be constructed out of two different interviews with Lanzmann, the Poles, and Simon Srebnik before the church. In the first segment, Mr. Kantarowski is not present; in the second he is. When the old woman says "So Pilate washed his hands . . . " Mr. Kantarowski makes the gesture of washing his hands.

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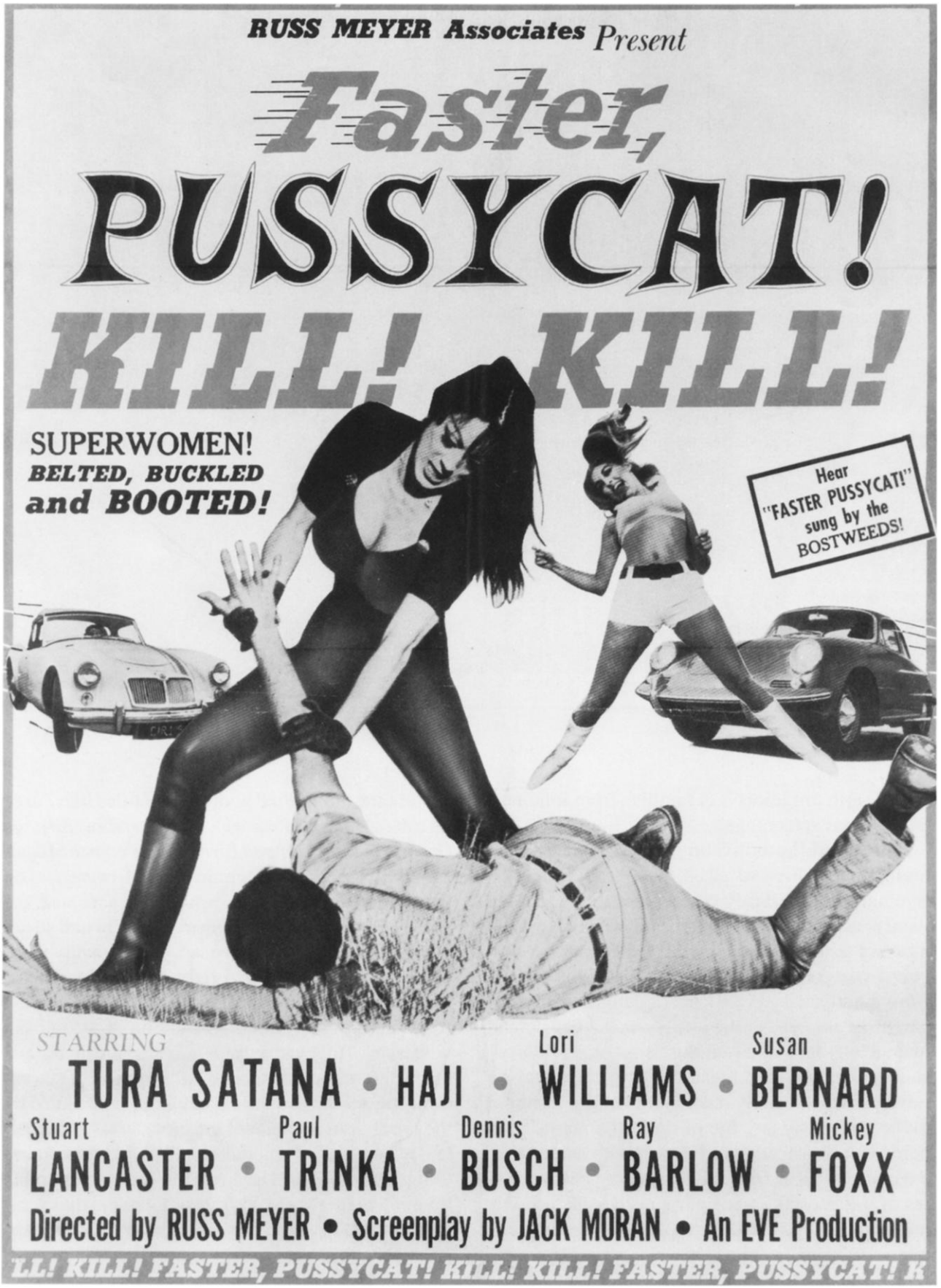
Gary Hentzi

Little Cinema of Horrors

Against a black screen divided by vertical white lines quivering in sympathy like a decibal meter, a portentously accented speaker, Hollywood-British, delivers the following remarks in a tone of mounting dread:

> Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to violence—the word and the act. While violence cloaks itself in a plethora of disguises, its favorite mantle still remains sex. Violence devours all it touches, its voracious appetite rarely fulfilled. Yet violence doesn't only destroy; it creates and molds as well. Let's examine closely, then, this dangerously evil creation, this new breed encased and contained within the supple skin of Woman. The softness is there, the unmistakable smell of female—the surface shiny and silken, the body yielding yet wanton. But a word of caution: handle with care and don't drop your guard. . . .

Better than any description, this opening voice-over from Russ Meyer's 1966 tour de force of sexploitation, *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*, conveys the ineffable quality, the mixture of engaging enthusiasm and shameless cliché that defines the cult of psychotronics. A meaningless word suggesting a teenager's idea of the far-out, psychotronics is the name of both a fan magazine and a catch-all genre of films which includes everything from aging horror movies to juvenile delinquent and biker films, drug films, women-in-prison films, mondo movies, and pornography that predates the hard-core era, as well as certain especially naïve or grisly educational shorts (for example, the ubiquitous *Signal 30*, shown in practically every driver's ed class in the country for over two decades). A list of typical titles has some of the same garish poetry as tabloid headlines: *Attack of the Giant Leeches; Color Me Blood Red; Zontar, The Thing from Venus; The Thrill Killers; Marihuana, Weed With Roots in Hell; The Astro-Zombies; They Saved Hitler's Brain; Cat Women of the Moon; The Nasty Rabbit.* Inseparably associated with these movies are the names of a small coterie of directors especially esteemed for their uncompromising trashiness—Ted V. Mikels, Herschell Gordon Lewis, Ray Dennis Steckler—some of whom are already well known, like the late Edward D. Wood, Jr., of *Plan Nine from Outer Space* fame, whose jaw-dropping dialogue ("All


RUSS MEYER Associates Present
Faster, PUSSYCAT! KILL! KILL!
SUPERWOMEN!
BELTED, BUCKLED
and BOOTED!
Hear "FASTER PUSSYCAT!" sung by the BOSTWEEDS!
STARRING
TURA SATANA • HAJI • Lori WILLIAMS • Susan BERNARD
Stuart LANCASTER • Paul TRINKA • Dennis BUSCH • Ray BARLOW • Mickey FOXX
Directed by RUSS MEYER • Screenplay by JACK MORAN • An EVE Production
LL! KILL! FASTER, PUSSYCAT! KILL! KILL! FASTER, PUSSYCAT! K

you of earth are idiots") is familiar from innumerable campus screenings.

What could be motivating this passionate turkey gourmandise? First of all, it must be said that the psychotronic sensibility is heterogeneous and often plainly suspect. At its worst, the writing in such organs of taste as *Cinemaphobia*, the *Trashola Newsletter*, or the compendium volume *Incredibly Strange Films* merely reflects the kind of delight in noxious extremity associated with heavy metal music and other adolescent male enthusiasms, e.g., "*Blood-sucking Freaks* is a mean, sleazy, misogynistic movie with no socially redeeming values. It should not be missed by any fan of deviant cinema." Yet there is also a substantial overlap with camp taste, and many of these films display all the characteristics of a successful piece of camp: visible artifice, outrageous exaggeration, and a healthy dose of self-love.

In fact, the studied goofiness of titles like *Three on a Meathook* or Steckler's *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* evinces a certain level of awareness on the part of the directors, who have accepted the unlikelihood of their making a good film and so are aiming for a campy one instead. Occasionally these howlers are even planted right in the films themselves, as at the end of *The Killer Shrews*, which sends up the Hollywood convention of the parting witticism. "In twenty-four hours, there'll be one shrew left on the island, and he'll be dead of starvation," muses the pedantic scientist, still intrigued by the prodigious appetite of the monsters. "An excellent example of overpopulation." "You know something, doctor," Our Hero replies, cozying up to his love interest (played by Ingrid Goude, Miss Universe of 1957), "I'm not gonna worry about overpopulation just yet."

Nevertheless, if these films sometimes grin and shrug their shoulders at their own badness, they also ask to be judged according to the specialized criteria applied to movies made expressly for the drive-in and grind-house circuit during the golden age of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies. Discussing his exclusion from the centers of power in the film industry, Ray Dennis Steckler goes right to the heart of the matter: "Hollywood is a situation where it really is *all money*." Instead of the latest Cadillac or some other movie business status symbol, "it's important to have film in the refrigerator . . . and to be ready to *go* when I have an idea." Or consider this vein of braggadocio from Ted V. Mikels: "We built a corpse-grinding machine for about $38 [this in reference to one of his most celebrated efforts, *The Corpse Grinders*]. If a studio were building something like that, $38 wouldn't even buy the *coffee* they'd drink. . . ." Freedom, individualism, and inventiveness in the face of fiscal limitations—these time-honored Yankee values are part and parcel of the schlock moviemaker's creed, and the psychotronics pantheon offers numerous examples of American ingenuity in action. Steckler's own "incredibly strange creatures" are fellow beatniks in papier-mâché masks. And in Ray Kellogg's *The Killer Shrews*, inspired cinematic *bricolage* puts on the emperor's new clothes when the monsters turn out to be dogs, wearing what look like tattered throw rugs over their backs and trailing stiff, Cowardly Lion-type tails, their unrodentlike mannerisms explained as the effect of "mutation." This kind of resourcefulness promised great things, and Kellogg did not disappoint: his all-American talents found their natural vehicle a few years later when he was chosen to direct John Wayne's yahoo-epic *The Green Berets*.

While the career of someone like Kellogg reminds us of how easily the qualities that sustain American individualism can be co-opted when profit remains the ultimate goal, his ability to make movies for next to nothing points to a major source of the psychotronic appeal. For these are above all low-budget movies, turned out by a kind of film industry underclass, who pride themselves on their ability to do without, and look on the privileges of their rich relatives with a mixture of envy and disdain. As a result, in their films we can *see* money—or rather the lack of it—and this fascinates us because of the way it exposes the conditions under which more successful Hollywood illusions are created. At this point, certain historical facts become inescapable. Most of the films admired by psychotronics enthusiasts are at least ten or fifteen years old, or more, and the beginnings of the cult itself date from around the same period. The reasons for this coincidence go beyond the death of the drive-in and the rise of home video, for the last decade and a half has seen an unprecedented increase in the production of big-budget spectacles, whose astonishingly convincing special effects are matched only by the unsurpassed shallowness of their conception.

In the presence of such a mindless display of wealth, ironic distance is invaluable, and a preference for cheap bad movies over expensive ones even comes to possess a certain subversive air. This at least is the implication of one petulant enthusiast,

The Killer Shrews

Jill Banner in *Spider Baby*

who observes that "people point out the flubs and continuity errors in [Ed Wood's] films, yet these same people are likely to become angry when you point out the numerous flubs in such favorites as *E. T.* or *Star Wars*." Spielberg and Ed Wood are both responsible for trash; however, the latter's childishness was genuine and didn't require a fortune to make its presence felt.

Psychotronic movies set out to give us convincing monsters, but their inevitable failure reminds us of the link between money and magic in our lives. This would be no strong recommendation, however, were it not for the films' unwillingness to take themselves too seriously. For an exemplary specimen of this lightheartedness, consider one of the authentic discoveries of recent years, Jack Hill's *Spider Baby*, which was shot in 12 days in the summer of 1964, though not released until 1968. The plot of the film is standard: a reclusive blue-blood clan afflicted with a bizarre hereditary illness dispatches some profit-minded interlopers with the help of the faithful family chauffeur (Lon Chaney, Jr.). While this moral scheme has a certain thematic relevance in view of the director's contempt for budgetary constraints, much of the film's appeal is traceable to the performance of a young actress named Jill Banner, whose Lolita-like qualities in the role of the problem child have the feeling of a found object.

And as is so often the case with psychotronic films at their best, the thin artifice of character, setting, and incident becomes vitalized by our awareness of the real people behind it—in this case, an inspired teenager playing at acting weird. *Spider Baby* is, moreover, a fairly self-conscious piece of camp (as opposed to the innocent, Ed Wood variety) and includes an assortment of inside jokes designed to call attention to the familiarity of the genre and its stars. One of the more sympathetic characters turns out to be a horror movie fan and offers an imitation of the mummy's walk over dinner ("step-scraaape, step-scraaape"); then, with Chaney himself sitting a few places away, she curls her lips and snarls like the wolfman. On its limited budget, *Spider Baby* can't

hope to deliver the thrills of those pioneering efforts, but it does manage a modest eccentricity and charm that are outside the repertoire of all but a very few horror movies.

This is perhaps the most important irony of the psychotronics phenomenon: that however extravagant the intentions of these film-makers may have been, they ended up showcasing what was closest to home. At the same time, if their films are a celebration of ordinariness, they also remind us of just how strange the ordinary can be in America and of how carefully polished an image of ourselves we are given by mainstream cinema. As with all social developments that are subject to the rhythms of popular culture, this one will probably have a limited life span and is unlikely to benefit from too much self-analysis. At the moment, however, it remains a typically idiosyncratic example of the alternative sensibilities that flourish in the vacant lots and junkyards of the global village.

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The word psychotronic *was first used by Michael Weldon, whose* The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film *(New York: Ballantine Books, 1983) provides the most complete filmography. Weldon apparently thought he had coined the word himself until he was reminded of a film entitled* The Psychotronic Man *(dir. Jack M. Sell, 1980), about a crazed barber who acquires the power to kill people by blinking at them. Weldon is also the editor of* Psychotronic *(151 1st Ave. Dept. PV, NY, NY 10003) and has a store of the same name in New York's East Village (305 E. 9th St.). Another essential reference is* Incredibly Strange Films, *ed. Jim Morton (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1986), which is the source of a number of the quotes in this article.*

Kathleen M. Vernon

Melodrama Against Itself

Pedro Almodóvar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*

Central to what might be called the purposeful eclecticism of Pedro Almodóvar's cinematic universe is the model of American film melodrama, a source which the Spanish director has appropriated to notably effective and often unexpected ends. Indeed, the presence of American film culture is palpable throughout his work, from the photographs of Ava Gardner and Elizabeth Taylor among the "greatest sinners of the world" in *Entre tinieblas* (*Dark Habits,* 1983) to the inclusion of clips from three well-known Hollywood films, Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* in *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?* (*What Have I Done to Deserve This?,* 1984), King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* in *Matador* (1986), and Nicholas Ray's *Johnny Guitar* in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown,* 1987).

American melodrama holds multiple attractions for Almodóvar. On the one hand, American film has provided him with a vehicle for articulating his distance from the themes and style of a recent Spanish film tradition obsessed with the country's tragic past.[1] Frequently quoted to the effect that he wished to make films as if Franco never existed—"I never speak of Franco; I hardly acknowledge his existence. I start *after* Franco.... The stories unfold as if he had never existed"[2]—Almodóvar can be said to have turned to Hollywood, the quintessential storyteller for a nation characterized by historical amnesia, for an alternate source of cultural and personal references (in that respect not unlike the function of Hollywood films in the novels of Manuel Puig). However, Almodóvar's borrowings from American film do not represent an unquestioning endorsement of the ideological underpinnings of Hollywood cinema. Instead, his intertextual and international network of references serves to question the role of film itself, not only in reflecting the ideologies and values of the society in which and for which it is created, but also in implicitly perpetuating those societal structures. Specifically, his importation of *American* melodrama into *Spanish* film casts the light of suspicion onto the way both film industries have mythified the representation of historically contingent categories (such as gender and socioeconomic class) as natural, essential "identi-

Carmen Maura as Gloria in *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*

ties" in their implicit construction of a larger, national self-identity.

Similarly, melodrama has allowed Almodóvar to articulate a moment of rupture in Spanish history, not merely imagining a Spain in which Franco never existed but constructing a repertoire of stories and images for a post-Franco Spain that is perhaps yet to be. Peter Brooks, in his influential study *The Melodramatic Imagination*, goes beyond thematic definitions of the genre to identify melodrama as "a mode of conception and expression, . . . a certain fictional system for making sense of experience,"[3] whose historical roots he traces to late eighteenth-century France:

> The origins of melodrama can be accurately located within the context of the French Revolution and its aftermath. This is the epistemological moment which it illustrates and to which it contributes: The moment

> that symbolically, and really, marks the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depend on such a society.[4]

In melodrama, then, Almodóvar also finds a "new" fictional system for conceiving and representing Spanish society in the aftermath of its own "ancien régime." The death of Franco, the politically and psychically repressive patriarch, "Caudillo por la Gracia de Dios," also marks the final passing of Spain's hierarchically conceived "organic democracy" and the institutional identification of church and state. Melodrama provides the mode for exploring the breakdown of old hierarchies and the resulting dissolution of barriers and boundaries in a post-patriarchal, post-religious Spain.[5]

It is nevertheless ironic that melodrama should play this role in Almodóvar's films. Grounded in a moral and thematic Manichaeanism, melodrama has often been read as constructing a fictional world of unambiguous absolutes, of villains vs. victims, shadow vs. light. Robert Lang has observed that the universe of melodrama depends on "clearly legible differences on all levels. It is a world of binary structures: men and women, masculine and feminine, the 'right' side and the 'wrong' side of the tracks,... brother and sister, work and love, material wealth and poverty."[6] Indeed, much of the appeal of melodrama for students of film lies in this symptomatic overdetermination of societal and gender roles.

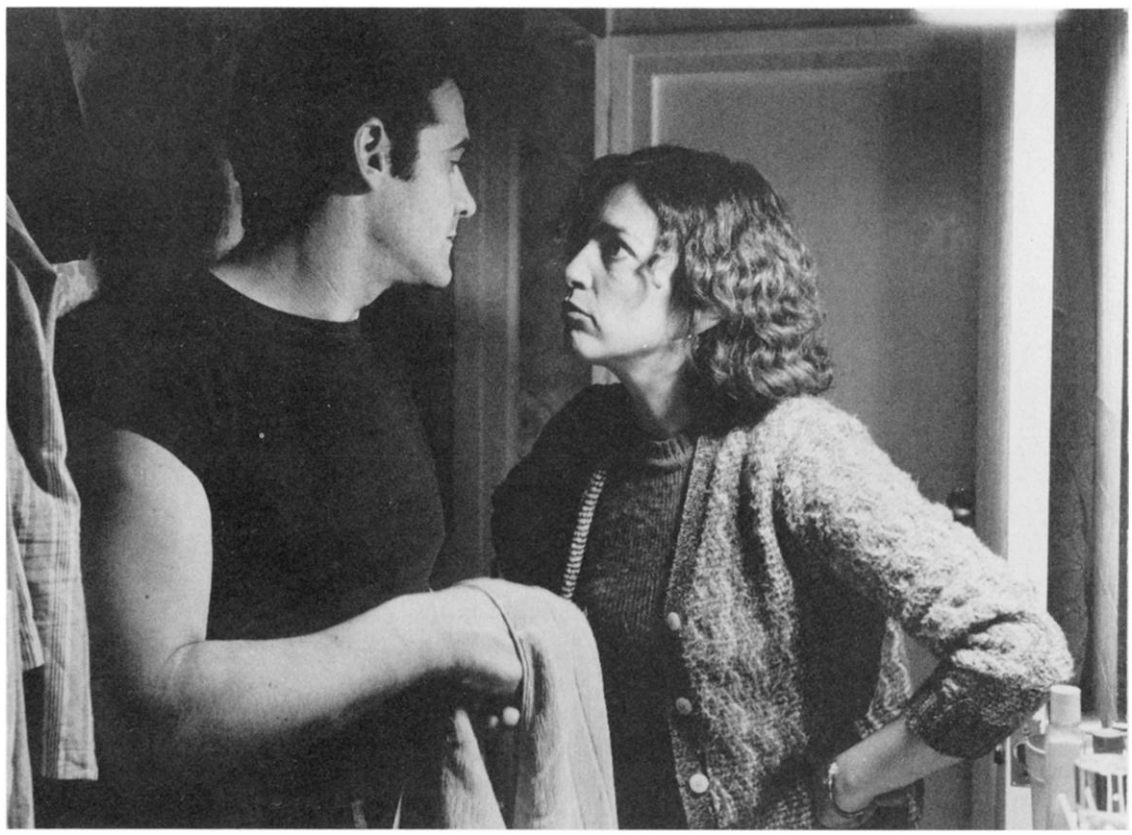
In the 1970s, feminist film critics turned to the domestic melodrama as a privileged area of investigation, a "woman's genre," where the representation of women on the screen and the (primarily female) audience's response are foregrounded and hence more accessible to and demanding of analysis. What they found there for the most part was a series of paradigmatic examples of the way "classic narrative cinema" works, and works on the spectator. They identified narrative structures and thematics which are not merely reflective of the hierarchical, patriarchal society in which they are produced; their very functioning as signifying practices and sources of pleasure and entertainment depends on the perpetuation and indeed polarization of differences and boundaries.

More recent studies have moved beyond this somewhat monolithic and generally ahistorical view to acknowledge the continuing attraction and fascination of film melodrama as a source of visual and affective pleasure and even to examine its function in creating a space for resistance against the very societal structures and values it would seem to represent.[7] It is this provocative ambivalence in the melodramatic imagination, understood here as a mode of spectatorial response, that Almodóvar has exploited so skillfully in his films, using melodrama in some sense against itself. My aim in this essay, then, will be to show how the director has appropriated the language of Hollywood melodrama as a mediating structure that would allow him to have it both ways, to opt out of the binarism apparently inherent in classic narrative film as well as in many contemporary analyses of such cinema. What I contend in my discussion of *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* is that while the film lays bare the material reality of filmic practice, the technological, economic, and institutional apparatus behind the illusion, while it acknowledges the complicity of narrative cinema in constructing images of femininity (in Laura Mulvey's words, "cut to the measure of [masculine] desire") its aim is not exclusively deconstructive.[8] Rather, the film holds out the possibility of rescuing an alternative, subversive visual pleasure that does not depend on an enunciatory structure grounded in sexual difference, and more particularly, in the repression of the feminine in favor of the masculine.

The initial sequences of *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*, the director's fourth feature film and his first international success, situate it as a cinematically mediated tale of frustrated feminine desire. The opening shot surveys a film crew on location in a Madrid square, closing in on the image of a woman crossing the plaza, followed by a man holding a sound boom. The music on the sound track evokes the movie scores written by Nino Rota for numerous Italian neorealist films. Our awareness of the filmic frame is further reinforced by the juxtaposition of the film's title and credits intercut with the images. The camera follows the woman (Carmen

Maura) into a karate studio, cutting to rows of men dressed in monk-like robes who practice the martial art of kendo by delivering grunting blows in the air with five-foot-long sticks. As Maura goes about her chores as a cleaning woman, the class ends and the studio empties out. But while she finishes up in a mirrored dressing room in the foreground of the shot, a naked man steps into a shower stall just beyond her on the right side of the frame. Maura's character's unabashed gaze at the spectacle of the male body is reflected and framed for the spectator up a stick left by one of the kendo students. The sequence ends with her striking furiously at the air as the man slinks guiltily out of the building.

Through its privileging of feminine desire, coupled with the assumption of the look by the female protagonist, Almodóvar's film from the outset issues an implicit challenge to the patriarchal structures of both power and pleasure inherent in the dominant cinema tradition as theorized by Laura Mulvey and subsequent feminist critics. According to Mulvey, narrative cinema is complicit with a



Gloria and her husband Antonio (Angel de Andres-López)

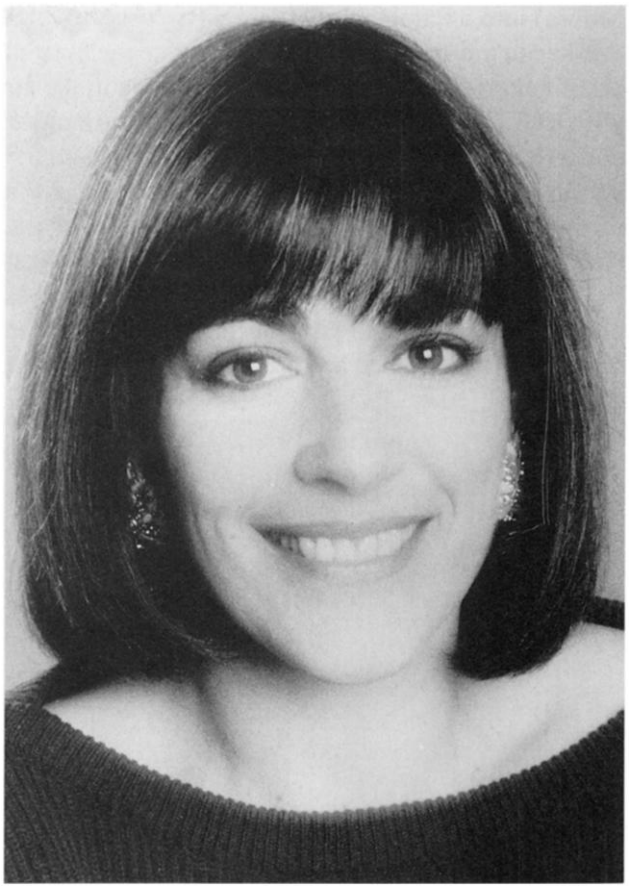
by the mirror on the wall. Sensing her presence, the man turns and beckons her into the shower. However, any erotic promise in the encounter for either characters or film audience is soon undercut. The sexual clinch beneath the streaming shower head responds neither to the horrific connotations of the Hitchcockesque shower scene—explicitly evoked in one shot—nor to the fantasy of instant sexual gratification in spontaneous, anonymous sex. The act itself is unsatisfyingly brief, especially for the woman, who then acts out her frustration by taking scopophilic regime of pleasure whereby the male spectator "possesses" (with its dual connotations of sexual and physical control or power) the female through the look—or rather the relay of looks—created by the camera, the male actor's gaze, and the male spectator who identifies with both.[9] In *What Have I Done?*, Almodóvar seeks to opt out of the societal and filmic system that would exclude the feminine except as a projection of male desire.

Even before his fourth film, Almodóvar had earned a reputation as a man at home cinematically

in a feminine universe. Both his first and third films, *Pepi, Luci, Bom y otras chicas del montón* (*Pepi, Luci, Bom and Other Ordinary Girls,* 1980) and *Dark Habits*, are set in the diverse womanly worlds of unhappy housewives, punk rock singers, and unconventional convents. While such a focus has been notably rare among Spanish film-makers, American studios cultivated women audiences for decades through the popular sub-genre known as "woman's pictures." Starring well-known actresses and concentrating on women's problems and specifically domestic issues, such films have been a staple of commercial melodrama.[10] But as Anglo-American feminist film critics have demonstrated, while "woman's pictures" provide a privileged locus for the analysis of representations of women on the film screen, these films have tended to offer only further variations on the Hollywood repertoire of repression which reduces women to images reassuring to the male viewer. In contrast to the image of the glamorous star as fetishistic projection of phallic sexuality, the "weepie," in its address to a primarily female audience who would identify with the trials of the heroine, serves up a de-eroticized image of the women as victim, often as mother or mental patient.[11] Such portrayals literally deflate the threat of feminine sexuality even as they channel the female viewer toward a masochistic over-identification—hence the tears—with the female protagonist.

Almodóvar would seem, at least initially, to have pursued that latter path in his characterization of the desperate housewife Gloria. Trapped in a cramped apartment with her thoughtless taxi-driver husband Antonio, her dotty diabetic mother-in-law addicted to sweet *magdalena* cakes and Catalán mineral water, and her two semi-delinquent sons (one sells drugs and the other sells his body to his friends' fathers), Gloria lives through a series of neverending days propped up by the pills she acquires illegally from her neighborhood pharmacy. The look of the film and its heroine is unrelentingly miserable, and the actress herself speaks of the effects of playing such a decidedly unglamorous role:

> During the shooting . . . I felt terribly depressed, as I'd imagined all women with a life like hers must feel. With hair like that, all messy, with those housecoats. . . I gradually became more and more miserable and then I also got very weepy.[12]



Carmen Maura as she does *not* appear in *What Have I Done?*

Maura's reactions are particularly revealing with regard to the affective axis of the film, established through the requisite identification between protagonist and audience. Nevertheless, the feelings the actress describes are not reflected in her portrayal of the hapless Gloria, whose emotional register is characterized more by lack of affect (due perhaps to drugs or lack of sleep) than by emotional excess. Instead, they testify to a process of interiorization of the spectator's role that surfaces at key moments of the film.

While the "woman's picture" can be said to function as the dominant model of spectatorial response for the film, the cultural meaning of the film as a whole accrues through a process of "semiotic layering," which operates by means of the juxtaposition of nationally and historically diverse film

Cristal, the prostitute next door (Veronica Forque), her client (Jaime Chavarri), and Gloria

sources.[13] I have already alluded, for example, to the references to Italian neorealism in the musical score. But the plot and mise-en-scène owe much more to a specifically Spanish tradition of black comedies from the fifties and early sixties. Grounded in the socioeconomic conditions of the period, these films focused on the plight of urban dwellers struggling to survive in a city unable to provide jobs and housing to a population swollen by recent arrivees from the economically even more desperate provinces. Films like Marco Ferreri's *El pisito* (*The Little Apartment*, 1958), José Antonio Nieves Conde's *El inquilino* (*The Tenant*, 1958), and particularly Luis García Berlanga's *El verdugo* (*The Executioner*, 1961) anticipate the plight of Gloria and her family in their modern cement-block urban highrise overlooking Madrid's M-30 superhighway.[14] Seen in this context, Almodóvar's social criticism appears all the more devastating in that it reveals the lack of fundamental change despite the intervening years—years of the so-called economic miracle and the end of Francoism. Contrary to the director's declarations about making films as if Franco never existed, *What Have I Done?* depicts a world created by the urban non-planning of the Franco years, growing out of a policy that actively sought by passive neglect of urban social services to discourage immigration to the "corrupt" cities.[15] Like the characters from those earlier films, both Gloria and her husband have come from the *pueblo*, the *pueblo* to which her mother-in-law and older son Toni will return at the end of the film. The post-Franco city has failed them, as it fails Gloria, despite their apparently greater material well-being in a world of time-saving home appliances, the "consumer paradise" of contemporary Spain.

Still, that criticism is tempered, or at least rendered deeply ambivalent, through the persons and

A maternal moment? Gloria with her older son, Toni

story of Toni and his grandmother, with their nostalgic longing for a return to the countryside. In their flight from the city they reenact the ending of the founding film of Spanish neorealism, José Antonio Nieves Conde's 1950 *Surcos* (*Furrows*). Hailed as "the first glance at reality in a cinema of papermaché"[16] for its serious treatment of the problem of the rural exodus to the cities, the film—in the hands of Falangist Nieves Conde—also served as a cautionary tale about the moral corruption and destruction of family structures that awaited new immigrants to the city. The film's conclusion, rewritten by the Spanish censors, projects the family's chastened return to the fields they never should have left. Almodóvar's film can in fact be read as an ironic rewriting of Nieves Conde's.

As in the earlier film, in *What Have I Done?* paternal authority is reduced or absent, and a harried mother overly preoccupied with material survival neglects her children's moral education. But Almodóvar's treatment of the subject takes the moral absolutes of *Surcos* and uses them against the values system they purport to represent. American film culture, decried well into the fifties as the devilish tool of a foreign, materialist ideology by the regime's guardians of Spanish moral and ethnic

purity, paradoxically provides the instrument whereby Toni and his grandmother are able to articulate their discontent with contemporary urban Spanish reality.[17] Sitting with his grandmother in a darkened movie theater watching Elia Kazan's double-edged pastoral, *Splendor in the Grass* (1961), Toni voices his identification with Bud Stamper's (Warren Beatty) rejection of his oil-baron father's ambitions and his desire to be a cattle farmer. "Maybe I'll set up a ranch in the *pueblo*," he exclaims, as his grandmother signals her enthusiastic assent. The historical irony for the (second-degree) spectator in Stamper's desire to return to a simpler age of American existence in a small Kansas town on the eve of the Stock Market crash underscores the untimeliness, and "unplacefulness," of Toni's dream as well. The small town is portrayed as a stifling, socially and sexually repressive place in the Kazan story, just as it is in numerous Spanish films of the same period, such as Juan Antonio Bardem's *Calle Mayor* (1956). Furthermore, as the *Surcos/Splendor* juxtaposition reminds us, the simpler past grandmother and grandson would return to is the past of Francoism, a past Almodóvar's films rewrite even as they seek to disavow it.

Another crucial distinction between both the Berlanga and Nieves Conde films and Almodóvar's lies in their treatment of the female protagonists, in each case a wife and mother. In the view of the earlier directors, the woman, Eve-like, draws the man into a Girardian triangle of desire with her eyes set firmly on financial gain and the acquisition of material goods. Thus the protagonist of *El verdugo*, for example, is trapped into becoming an executioner in order to provide an apartment for his wife and child-to-be. For Almodóvar, in contrast, it is the housewife who becomes a pawn in a patriarchal and capitalistic system of exchange. Obsessed by the pressures of meeting payments on the apartment, the television, washing machine, and refrigerator, Gloria's other desires are displaced onto those consumer goods. But those longings are also turned back against her. A number of critics have examined the historical links between commercial cinema as entertainment and as advertisement, a complicity which situates the female addressee of the woman's picture as potential consumer of images of herself and her surroundings.[18] In *What Have I Done?*, once again, the character mirrors the spectator's role, for she too is being sold a bill of goods. As the director expresses it in his summary of the film: "[Gloria] would like to become a member of the consumer society, but only manages to consume herself, day by day."[19] Thus, even as she struggles to survive, Gloria is aware of the distance that separates her life from the idealized images of women she sees in magazines in the doctor's office or in beauty shop windows. While it is the men in her life who fail to satisfy her, she interiorizes her discontent as a form of self-hatred. In a scene whose comic extremes may blind us to its incisiveness, she sells her son to a pederast dentist in order to buy a curling iron she has seen in a shop window and about which she fantasizes as the instrument of her transformation.[20]

Almodóvar's films constantly foreground the topic of narrative cinema's collusion with the language and address of advertising. From *Pepi, Luci, Bom* to *Atame* (*Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down,* 1989) the director has delighted in including mock commercials within his films. *What Have I Done?* is no exception in that regard, but here the codes of television advertising spill over into the diegesis itself. In a telling sequence early in the film, Gloria has returned from her cleaning woman's job at the karate school to her kitchen, where she takes up her other full-time job. Placing her amid a conventional kitchen setting, the camera portrays the protagonist in a series of reverse-angle shots, a classic editing figure in a two-character scene. But Gloria is alone in the room, bending first to fill her washing machine with clothes and then to remove a pan from the oven. In both instances the camera is positioned so as to show the appliances, in effect, looking back at her. While this non-naturalistic use of the reverse-angle shot is startling to the spectator, it is not entirely unfamiliar, since TV commercials for clothes washers and fried-chicken recipes long ago appropriated this particular editing figure. Framed in this way, the image of the desiring female subject of consumer society collapses into her own objectification. While foregrounding the role of the cinematic apparatus, as Charles Eckert has noted, in "fetishizing products and putting the libido in libidinally invested advertising,"[21] *What Have I Done?* once again recalls the specifically Spanish context in which it functions and consequently evokes the history of the explicit political manipulation of consumer desire under the Franco regime. Indeed, the creation of a prosperous consumer society, as theorized and promoted by arch-technocrat Gonzalo

Fernández de la Mora in his 1961 book, *The Twilight of Ideologies*, was conceived as a strategy to guarantee political apathy among Spaniards. As historians of the period Raymond Carr and Juan Pablo Fusi observe: "There is nothing like the installment system to weaken the striker's resolution, nothing like relative wellbeing after struggle to weaken 'solidarity' as a working-class value."[22]

Thus the two initial circuits of desire remain uncompleted; they end in apparently irreversible frustration, blocked, at least in part, by history and the persistent legacy of the Franco years. Gloria will find no satisfaction, nor even relief, in sexual or material fulfillment. Instead, the film is carried to thematic and affective closure by a third circuit, the still more exclusively feminine realm of the maternal melodrama, with its rich filmic intertext. The director himself has signaled this dimension of the film, stating that:

> It's a film about motherhood. . . . In it are reflected different embodiments of the maternal. Carmen Maura's character is that of the mother pure and simple, the mother who keeps the home together, who carries it all on her back. There are frustrated mothers like Cristal, who's a wonderful mother. And there's a very typically Spanish mother that appalls me, the kind who's always hitting her kids, that tense sort of mother I see in the streets of Madrid, the kind that, if the child falls down, on top of it all she beats him for it, very violent. And within all those mothers is my own. For me it's very significant: I was making a film about my own social class, about my origins and my family, a type of family I recognize, and I wanted my own mother to be there.[23]

The cultural specificity of Almodóvar's cast of mothers in the film—including, as he notes, his own, Francisca Caballero, who plays the role of the white-haired lady from the old *pueblo* whom Gloria meets in the dentist's office—distinguishes his film from the ideological traditions of the maternal melodrama as described by Linda Williams in her study of that quintessential film of maternal self-sacrifice, King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937). Identifying an ethic of maternal self-abnegation as the hallmark of the genre, Williams signals the paradox in that "frequently the self-sacrificing mother must make her sacrifice that of the connection to her children—either for their or her own good."[24] This self-canceling structure, she notes, serves as "[a] device [for] devaluing and debasing the actual figure of the mother while sanctifying the institution of motherhood in general."[25]

In many ways, then, Almodóvar's film could not seem farther from the Hollywood ethic of glorified feminine masochism. First of all, in contrast to the traditional film mother, Gloria does not sublimate her sexual desires entirely into her maternal role. As we have seen, the film begins with an emphatic, if frustrated, expression of her sexuality. Second, until the very end of the film, Gloria gives little evidence of traditional motherly behavior. Her demonstrations of maternal affection are limited to her contacts with Vanessa, the telekinetic daughter of her neighbor Juani, the "bad mother" characterized in the Almodóvar quotation. Her ties to her own two sons, in contrast, are strained by the family's dire economic circumstances. But if we focus more closely on her relationship with her younger son, Miguel, the profile of the melodramatic movie mother may be seen to offer a more appropriate point of comparison.

In the early scenes of the film, Gloria is shown as being unable to fulfill the most archetypal of maternal functions toward Miguel: that of providing physical nourishment. When he comes home to a bare refrigerator, she is forced to send him off to her neighbor Cristal, the prostitute next door, for dinner and a sandwich for tomorrow's lunch. This ceding of maternal rights and responsibilities prefigures her later surrender of Miguel to the dentist. The defining gesture in the portrayal of Gloria within the circuit of maternal desire, this surrender bears striking similarities to Stella Dallas's sacrifice of her daughter to a "better" mother, the upper-class wife of her former husband. In Gloria's case as well, the mother seeks to provide her child with the material advantages she cannot herself give her offspring. "You know how bad it is at home. I can barely feed you," she tells her son, who then bargains with the dentist for a stereo system, a VCR, and painting lessons. In the Almodóvar version, it is true, there is an ironic slippage between the altruistic act of maternal self-sacrifice in its most characteristic movie

Grandmother (Chus Lampreave) with her pet lizard

form and Gloria's more venal desire for a hair curler, but this subversion works against the sentimentalizing tendencies of the traditional maternal melodrama and its destructive idealization of motherhood. Unlike Stella's smiling apotheosis at the end of *Stella Dallas* as a woman who has denied her very identity as mother for the daughter she loves, Gloria's act passes virtually unnoticed, even by the boy's father, who, we are later told, was never aware of his son's absence.

The conclusion to Almodóvar's film also runs a rather different course from the King Vidor classic, as ensuing events apparently intervene to liberate Gloria from her role as both wife and mother. Driven to the edge by too many demands for ironed shirts and dinner on the table, Gloria accidentally kills her husband with a ham bone. In a sense Antonio's largely comic and narratively convenient demise only serves to confirm his estrangement, throughout the film, from the rest of the household and from the film's both real-world and cinematic referents. The would-be champion of moral *decencia*, he chastises Gloria for her work outside the home and her friendship with neighbor Cristal, and as such represents the voice of an archaic values system ill-suited to current economic and social realities. Antonio's emotional distance from his family is conveyed through his obsessive playing of the Zarah Leander song "Nicht nur aus Liebe weinen," for him a nostalgic token of his love affair with his former employer, Ingrid Müller, the aging *chanteuse* for whom he forged a series of Hitler letters during a stint as a "guest worker" in Germany. Indeed, a number of viewers and critics have complained of the tangential character of this complicated Teutonic subplot. I would argue rather that this element

of the film is significant, in its conception if not in its execution. Drawing this time not upon Hollywood melodrama but on one of its European cousins, as it were, the director plots the husband's story, the real historical drama of economic exile, against the suspect nostalgia of the so-called retro film. With its foregrounding of the Ingrid Müller/Zarah Leander figure, however, Almodóvar's version evokes Fassbinder's critical variation on the genre, *Veronika Voss*, or especially *Lili Marleen*, with its basis in the life story of another Nazi star, Lale Anderson.

Whatever his role in life, Antonio's death is key to the film's denouement. For with him literally out of the picture, the other members of the family leave to pursue their separate destinies, as if acknowledging their own liberation from the yoke of paternal authority. While Miguel is apparently happily ensconced with his dentist, the grandmother and Toni achieve their desired departure for the *pueblo*, thanks to bus tickets purchased with the proceeds from Toni's drug dealing. But as the director moves with characteristic verve to wrap up the remaining plot lines, a sudden change in the tone of the film provides a final twist. Gloria's good-byes to her son and mother-in-law, cued by the scene's bluesy saxophone score, evoke a surprising pathos, an emotional response blocked until this point in the film. Upon her return to her empty house, Gloria encounters a sense of overwhelming solitude rather than relief. Looking over the balcony to the pavement below, she is drawn toward the void, until she catches sight of Miguel running up the steps. Parody converges with genuine melodrama as the film's finale stages an emotional reunion between mother and younger son.[26] Home once again, Miguel announces his decision to stay because, although the dentist was fun for a while, "I'm too young to be tied down to anyone, and besides," as he tells his mother, "this house needs a man."

The affective punch of these final scenes is heightened by the autobiographical subtext to the film. In addition to his own mother, Almodóvar has included in the character of Miguel a portrait of himself as a young film-maker-to-be. The boy's painting lessons, the Zoetrope he spins in his bedroom at night before shutting off his light, even his precocious homosexuality mark the character as a projection of the director. Thus the ending represents not simply a self-conscious restatement of classic melodramatic closure but a more broadly self-reflexive gesture which Almodóvar uses to offer a slyly open conclusion. By completing the thematic and affective circuit of the film in the realm of the maternal, the film rewrites the traditional Oedipal scenario. The playful asymmetry of the mother/son couple denies the restrictive narrative logic of the patriarchal family, both on and off the film screen. In the absence of the paternal Law, it is suggested, mother and son are free to explore—and create—forms of sexuality and sexual identity impossible under traditional societal and familial structures.

In fact, the possibilities held out by this post-patriarchal society have already been hinted at quite tellingly in the concluding sequences of the film. In a touch of canny Almodovarian logic, the police detective investigating the death of Gloria's husband turns out to be the same impotent man with whom she shared the opening shower scene. When the distraught widow confesses her role in her husband's death, the detective refuses to believe her and the case is closed. In a world where the Law has lost its potency and the power to enforce its strictures, crimes have no consequences.[27] Attacking the foundations of linear causality, the film affirms its power, not, as one might have thought, to forget history, the past of Francoism, but to challenge the hold of that history over future stories. Thus the ending to *What Have I Done to Deserve This?* ought really to be read not as a resolution but rather as a beginning to the film-maker's, and his audience's, ongoing task of rewriting post-Franco, post-patriarchal society.

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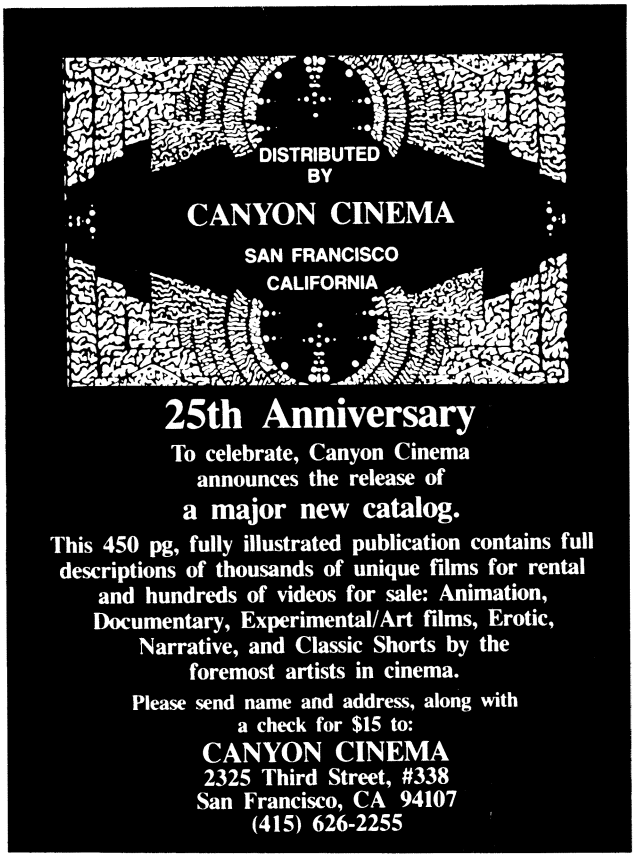
Notes

1. Significantly, melodrama has not been widely cultivated by the better-known oppositional film-makers in Spain who have preferred the elegiac mode (Victor Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* and *El sur*), rural tragedy (Ricardo Franco's *Pascual Duarte* and Mario Camus's *Los santos inocentes*), black comedy (most of Luis García Berlanga, and Carlos Saura's *El jardín de las delicias*, among many others) and psychological drama (much of Saura).

2. Peter Besas, *Behind the Spanish Lens: Spanish Cinema under Fascism and Democracy* (Denver: Arden Press, 1985), p. 216.
3. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. xiii.
4. Ibid., pp. 14–15.
5. In an interview with Michael Bronski ("Almodóvar: Post-Franco American?" *Zeta Magazine*, April 1989, pp. 65–66), Almodóvar speaks (apropos of *La ley del deseo*) of his own secular appropriations of the sacred in his films as a reflection of a generalized practice within contemporary Spanish culture: "I think you have to realize that although there is a strong Catholic religious feeling and history in Spain, it is now viewed as a cultural tradition and not as an institution.... It is very common in Spanish culture to steal the religious ceremonies away from God and keep them for yourself. This is important. The ceremonies are sometimes very beautiful and many times people even forget the origin of their images or their ceremonies and use them for their own needs. I like this. It is a very pragmatic, practical use of religion. It is artistic about life."
6. Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 163.
7. Christine Gledhill's introductory essay, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," to her edited volume, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987) offers a cogent critical survey of the history of recent approaches to film melodrama. In her essay, as in Thomas Elsaesser's "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations of the Family Melodrama," reprinted there, both authors stress the ideological ambiguity and adaptability of melodrama, which may "function either subversively or as escapism ... relative to its given historical and social context" (47). In addition to the essays anthologized in Gledhill, for two important contextual studies of the uses of melodrama in Latin American and Spanish cinemas respectively, see Ana López, "The Melodrama in Latin America," *Wide Angle,* vol. 7, no. 3 (1985), pp. 5–13, and Marsha Kinder, "An Introduction," *Spanish Cinema. The Politics of Family and Gender* (Los Angeles: The Spanish Ministry of Culture and the USC School of Cinema-Television, 1991). In the former, López notes the rejection of melodrama by the theorists and practitioners of New Latin American Cinema as a form of cultural dependence and its subsequent, strategic rehabilitation within a "second wave" of New Latin American Cinema. Kinder, in contrast, studies the role of melodrama in early post-civil war Spanish cinema as "the official organizing narrative for a neo-Catholic fascist discourse"(5). Almodóvar's own appropriation of melodrama via Hollywood, as I suggest later, may profitably be read against this intertext.
8. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 25.
9. See especially part three, "Woman as Image, Man as Bearer of the Look," in Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure," pp. 19–24.
10. The bibliography on the relation between melodrama and the "woman's picture" is extensive. Historically and theoretically significant approaches include Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the Forties* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); and Gledhill's *Home Is Where the Heart Is.* This last volume includes a substantial bibliography.
11. See, in particular, chapters 2 and 3, "Clinical Eyes: The Medical Discourse" and "The Moving Image: Pathos and the Maternal," in Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 38–69.
12. Nuria Vidal, *The Films of Pedro Almodóvar* , trans. Linda Moore, in collaboration with Victoria Hughes (Madrid: Instituto de Cine, Ministerio de Cultura, 1988), p. 110.
13. I adapt the concept of semiotic layering from Maureen Turim, "Gentlemen Consume Blonds," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods,* vol. II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 377, where she defines it as: "The accrual and transformations of meanings associated with an artifact as it passes through history, or as it is presented in different versions." In Almodóvar's case the process takes on a cross-cultural dimension as well.
14. Almodóvar has alluded to these antecedents in interviews: See John Hopewell, *Out of the Past: Spanish Cinema after Franco* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), p. 239, and Marsha Kinder, "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality: A Conversation with Pedro Almodóvar," *Film Quarterly,* vol. 41, no. 1 (Fall 1987), pp. 38–9.
15. See the discussion in Raymond Carr and Juan Pablo Fusi, "The Rural Exodus," in *Spain: From Dictatorship to Democracy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981), pp. 66–70.
16. José García Escudero, *La historia del cine español en cien palabras*. Cited in Hopewell, p. 56.
17. See, for example, the discussion in Carmen Martín Gaite, *Usos amorosos de la postguerra española* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1987), pp. 30–34. The opinions quoted by Martín Gaite are tellingly echoed in Luis Berlanga's brilliant reflection on the intertwining of Spanish-American cinematic and political relations in his 1953 film *Bienvenido Mr Marshall,* in the character of the village priest who warns against Americans bearing gifts.
18. Most notably, Charles Eckert, "The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies,* vol. 3, no. 1 (1978), rpt. in Jane Gaines and Charlotte Herzog, eds., *Fabrications* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 100–121; Jeanne Thomas Allen, "The Film Viewer as Consumer," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies,* vol. 5, no. 4 (1980), pp. 481–499; Mary Ann Doane, "The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema," in *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 22–33.
19. Vidal, *The Films of Pedro Almodóvar*, p. 113.
20. The importance of that particular scene and the director's rather unconventional solution for shooting Gloria looking/longing at the items in the store window, is discussed in Vidal, p. 105.
21. Eckert, p. 121.
22. Carr and Fusi, pp. 35, 89.
23. Quoted by Francisco Blanco "Boquerini," *Pedro Almodóvar* (Madrid: Ediciones JC, 1989), p. 63. The translation is mine.

24. Linda Williams, "'Something Else Besides a Mother': *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, p. 300.
25. Ibid.
26. In her interview with Almodóvar, "Pleasure and the New Spanish Mentality," Marsha Kinder targets exactly the affective dynamics I'm trying to evoke here : "It seems to me that what lies at the center of your unique tone... is that fluidity with which you move ... from one feeling or tone to another, so that when a line is delivered, it's very funny and borders on parody... but at the same time ...[it] moves us emotionally.... You start out by demystifying how movies work, but then by the end of the film those same dynamics still work on the audience very powerfully" (37, 40).
27. I thank Marvin D'Lugo for calling my attention to this role of the police as spectators-in-the-text, called upon, in a number of the director's films, to ratify the characters' unconventional, and, for Spaniards, once unthinkable life choices. See his discussion in "Almodóvar's City of Desire," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1991), pp. 47–65.



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Reviews

Dream of Light (El sol del membrillo)

Writer/director: Victor Erice. Cinematographers: Javier Aguirresarobe, Angel Luis Fernández, and José Luis López Linares. Editor: Juan Ignacio San Mateo. Music: Pascal Gaigne. Spain, 1991.

Feature films about painters (real or fictional) invariably spring from two assumptions. First, there must be plenty of drama in their protagonists' lives. Suffering and fits of madness attract the camera with particular force: hence the popularity of van Gogh as a subject, most recently for Altman, Pialat, and Kurosawa (in an episode of *Dreams*). Second, this drama infuses the painters' works to give them transcendental value, otherwise known as genius.

Rivette's *La belle noiseuse* (shown at the 1991 New York Film Festival as an accidental precursor of *Dream of Light* in 1992) pushes the envelope of the genre by emphasizing the painter's preparations—assembling materials, making preliminary sketches, experimenting with different poses, and struggling through false starts and changes of mind. The romantic assumptions still flourish, however, in the painter's reclusiveness, the pervasive sexual tension, and the implication that the painting is too powerful/revealing/disturbing to be displayed.

In documentaries about painters, the assumptions persist in muted form. Though Clouzot's *Le mystère Picasso*, one of the best of the genre, tells us nothing about its subject's life, the title implies drama, and the director of *Les diaboliques* cannot resist injecting suspense by urging Picasso to finish an improvisation before the film reel ends. And the choice of Picasso presents his genius as a given.

Antonio López, the subject of Victor Erice's offbeat documentary, is no household name in the United States, and what we see and hear of his private life is thoroughly undramatic. If he appears as a genius, it is not because of drunken rages à la Kirk Douglas, Tim Roth, et al., but only thanks to an infinite capacity for taking pains. All that López's work can be seen to distill of his outer life is patience and the ability to stand still. Yet Erice's meditative appraisal of this unlikely hero generates an extraordinary sense of wonder.

The film begins with López in his studio, making a frame and covering it with canvas. Then he goes out to the back yard and prepares to paint the quince tree growing there. (The Spanish title, *El sol del membrillo*—"the quince tree sun"—refers to a sunny period in the fall that coincides with the ripening of quinces.) Though the emphasis on preparation recalls *La belle noiseuse*, the details differ sharply: López's serenely meticulous procedure mesmerizes as it amuses. First, he acknowledges the tree as more than a visual object by leaning forward to smell its fruit. Then, with a stepladder, he sets up two posts, runs a cord between them, and hangs a plumb line midway. Having thus "framed" the tree, López carefully places his easel and canvas obliquely to the left. A check of his position in front of the tree leads to a minor adjustment: he takes a shovel to the ground so that he can stand about one inch lower. Satisfied with his standpoint, he taps long nails into the ground in front of his shoes.

He places a ruler horizontally on the canvas and then holds it in front of the tree. Finally he dips his brush into white paint and... traces a horizontal line along the wall behind the tree. Next he puts dabs of white paint on several leaves and on the trunk. (Later he puts similar dabs on the fruit.) This of course creates a certain mystery, though the explanation—which will arrive in due course—is quite simple. The point is that Erice has aroused interest in López without using voice-over or explanatory titles, without showing him interact with anyone else, and before he has put brush to canvas.

Just as Clouzot's approach to Picasso showed traces of the willfully somber tension of *Le corbeau*, *Le salaire de la peur*, and *Les diaboliques*, *Dream of Light* recalls the oblique and elliptical narratives of Erice's *El espíritu de la colmena* (*Spirit of the Beehive*) and *El sur* (*The South*). Nothing is readily explained: each new scene may introduce a minor mystery that is resolved little by little, but perhaps never completely, by subsequent scenes. The viewer

is drawn into a workaday world that hangs on the brink of the marvelous.

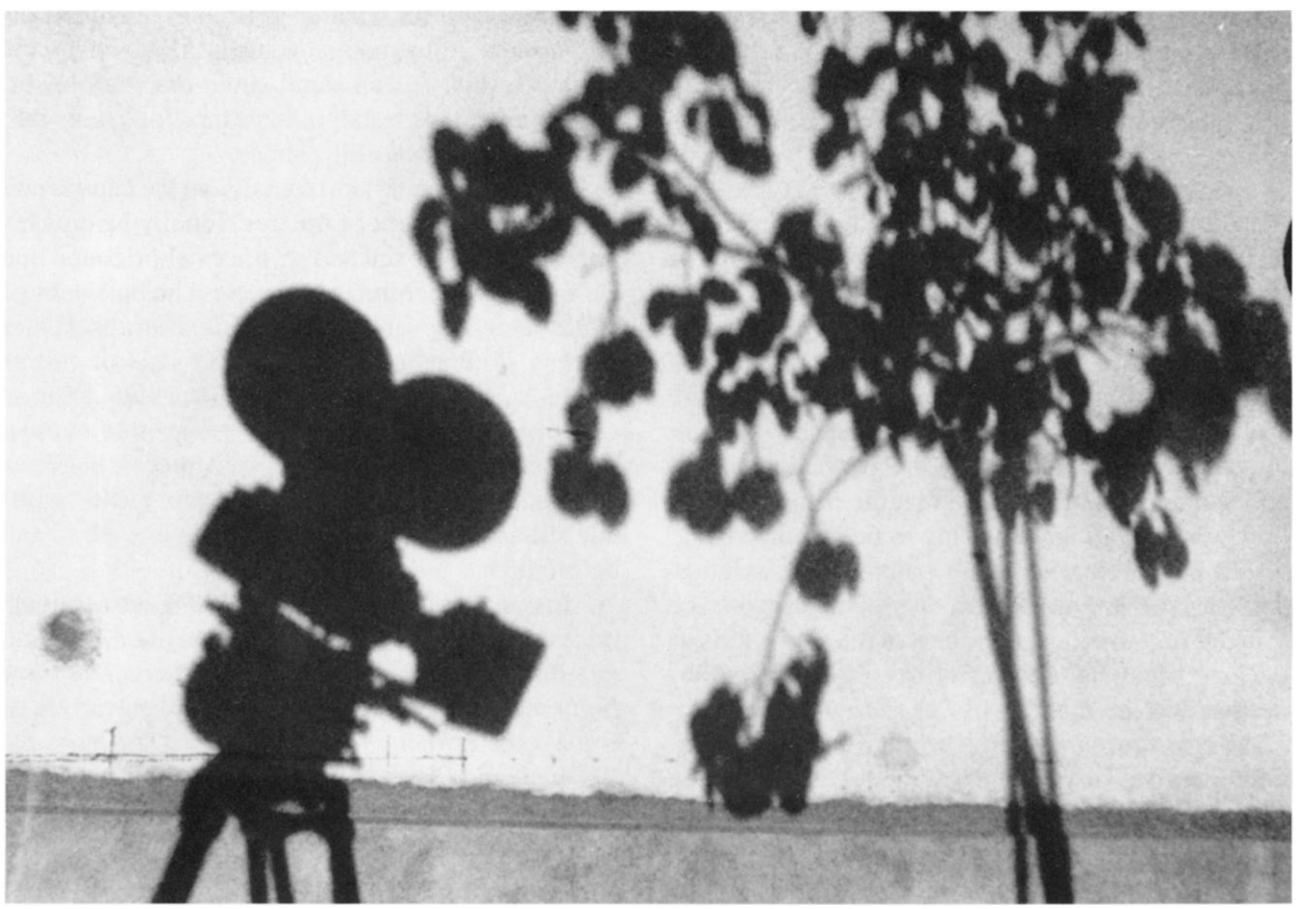
As López paints, Erice cuts away from time to time to other people, beginning with three construction workers, a young painter of splashy nonfigurative canvases, and an older woman who is putting finishing touches on an engraving. Gradually we discover that the workers are Polish immigrants who are renovating part of the studio building, the young painter is a tenant, and the older woman is López's wife, María Moreno. They fill in the immediate context of López's daily life and work. So, too, do Erice's frequent brief camera excursions into the surrounding Madrid neighborhood—sometimes accompanied on the sound track by López's singing as he paints.

Visitors to the back yard include López's daughters and his old art school friend and fellow painter, Enrique Gran, who reminisces extensively about their youth. Thus López's background is extended in time, both forward and backward.

Often López has a portable radio beside him as he paints, with frequent news reports extending his background in space to the world at large. And at night the camera often lingers on a television seen through a nearby window, linking the film and painting we are watching to the most popular of visual media (one that Erice himself has worked in extensively). At one point visitors from the world at large arrive at the quince tree: a Chinese woman (painter? critic?) with her interpreter, who shuttles questions and answers about López's painting between Chinese and Spanish.

The outside world impinges on López in another way: through long periods of rain. Meticulously prepared for this too, he has the Polish workers bring out a large plastic-sheeted frame that covers both the tree and his easel. But the rain becomes so heavy that it spills onto him, and in any case the light is wrong. After three weeks of interrupted work, López decides to abandon the painting and start on a drawing instead. His world changes; his world continues.

The quince tree in *Dream of Light*



Dream of Light's Copernican revolution (María Moreno, left)

The purpose of the white paint on wall and tree becomes clear when the young painter is seen holding a stick under one of the branches. As the quinces ripen, their increasing weight drags the branches down from their original marked positions, and the stick pushes them back. But López will not carry his cheating of time to extremes.

One morning there is a change: he finds a quince fallen on the ground, and shortly afterward he starts to pack up. It isn't clear whether he considers the drawing completed: in any case, there's no fear of its destructive power, as in *La belle noiseuse*. López celebrates the end of his work by picking several quinces—a quiet ritual that recalls his prefatory smelling of them and acknowledges the creative power of time.

So far, *Dream of Light* has built up a world in which López stands at the center. Although there's nothing megalomaniac about this centrality—it's the kind we all share—and although the outside world remains unaffected by López and his quince tree, the emphasis on his painting might suggest that it has some transcendent value. But now, very quietly, Erice gives us a Copernican revolution.

Moreno helps López into a heavy winter coat. Is he going out? No, he lies down on a bed. Then, in a reverse angle, we see an unfinished painting of López lying on a bed in a winter coat. This is Moreno's painting and López is her model, her quince tree. Yes, he is the central painter in this film, but that's a matter of choices; there could easily have been another choice, another center.

At this point the film has been running for about two hours and it could well have ended. Instead, Erice has López fall asleep and have a dream—a discordant fictional touch—and he also spells out a connection that could have been left implicit. In the back yard at night, the movie camera is seen in front of the quince tree with two of the tripod legs placed against López's marker nails.

Erice's filming of López does to a large extent reflect López's painting and drawing of the quince

tree. Camera and microphone are placed with meticulous care to avoid obfuscation: we can see and hear clearly what is going on in each scene. The sequences are presented in chronological order, with titles identifying their dates (from Saturday, September 29 to Tuesday, December 11, 1990). It seems that obsessive realism in one visual art is brought to us by obsessive realism in another.

Realism is a fighting word, but in this instance no fighting is necessary. After all, we know that what we see and hear is selective, that Erice may have contrived or altered events, or that the mere presence of camera and microphone distorted the flow of reality. In any case, the (apparent) realism leads not to a tidy conclusion but to challenging questions and answers.

The most obvious question is, Why paint? The usual screen answer doesn't apply: López hardly appears to be a tormented genius who feels compelled to bare his soul. The Marxist answer—Look at economics—is more plausible, since López seems comfortably well-off. Yet the desire to make money fails to account for the extraordinary time and effort that López invests in two works which, even if complete, would not conform to leading market fashions. One is left to stumble among psychoanalytic answers and their popular equivalents—which, in the absence of hard knowledge about López, can only be speculation. López himself says, "It's very difficult to know why you paint: it's something I don't need to know, and I don't really worry about it."

To the somewhat less difficult question, Why paint like this? López also replies, "I don't know." But he may indicate a partial answer when he remarks that he used to paint nonrealistically. Since the change occurred with his work on a street scene begun in 1974 and completed in 1981, thus bracketing the end of the Franco regime, the new political climate may have dissolved a prior reluctance to face reality (of any kind). Yet this too is mere speculation.

Certainly the companion question, Why make a film like this? would lead to a different answer. Erice's feature-film debut, *El espíritu de la colmena* (1973), was made under the Franco regime, which he was able to criticize only by oblique tropes and analogies. The clips from *Frankenstein* that play a central role in the narrative carry the echo of Franco's name, and the title of the film (whose narrative is set in 1940) may be patterned on *El espíritu de la raza*, a 1941 Nationalist film based on a story by Franco, with the "race" changed to a totalitarian hive. Just as Franco's hero is brought back to life after facing a Republican firing squad, Frankenstein's monster—says Isabela to her little sister Ana—survives his death in the movie. With Erice, however, this obliquity has persisted long after the end of the Franco regime. In *El sur* (1983) the relations among the family members and the main characters outside are disclosed as elliptically as in *Dream of Light*.

If the sources of the apparent realism in López's painting and in Erice's film-making remain question marks, the effects grow clearer as the film unfolds. The steady gaze and the avoidance of either drama or explanation transform the "reality" in front of the camera and microphone into an enriched reality on the screen. In compressing the events of a few months into just over two hours, Erice concentrates them in such a way that the kinds of uncertainties and inconsistencies and hypotheses we experience in unfamiliar real-life situations stand out with preternatural clarity and force. If the glib coda offers somewhat conventional mystifications and solutions, it also throws into relief the achievement of the rest of the film: to entertain and challenge us with the mystery of ordinary events shown clear. As the light fades from the screen the dream persists, and the film turns out, after all, to have been an enthralling drama.

WILLIAM JOHNSON

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Fool's Fire

Direction, teleplay, and puppet design by Julie Taymor. Based on the short story "Hop-Frog" by Edgar Allan Poe. Produced by Kerry Orent and Julie Taymor. Photography by Bobby Bukowsky. Edited by Alan Miller. Character technical direction by Michael Curry. PBS. "American Playhouse."

Michael Anderson as Hop-Frog in *Fool's Fire*

As a person with a dwarfism, as a person considerably shorter than average, I'm often saddened and enraged by the representation of short stature in mainstream media, particularly by the representation of dwarfs. Whenever the issue of physical stature appears, it almost always affirms the prevalent attitude that height equals power: the taller you are, the more powerful you are, especially if you're a man. Because dwarfs can never be "tall," or even of "average" height, they are therefore traditionally assumed to never exercise any meaningful personal or political power. The virtual absence of little people in positions of social influence affirms this impression. In depicting dwarfs, audiovisual media often exploit truncated stature and bodily "deformities" for their derisive humor or shock value. Usually, dwarfs only decorate the background of a particular scene to lend it an air of strangeness. This employment of dwarfism-as-spectacle discourages understanding little people as fellow human beings. Fortunately, Julie Taymor's PBS film *Fool's Fire* (1992) finally foregrounds the oppressiveness of dwarfism-as-spectacle and offers a parable of resistance against the powers that shape it.

Produced as part of PBS's "American Playhouse" series, *Fool's Fire* adapts Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Hop-Frog" (1849) into a lavish-looking, hour-long drama. Set sometime during the early European Renaissance, Taymor's film focuses on a dwarf man (Michael Anderson, best known for his role as the dancing dream-dwarf in "Twin Peaks"), who is forced to become the court jester for a cruel King (Tom Hewitt). Assigned the demeaning name Hop-Frog, the dwarf draws upon his powers of illusion and his culinary talents to amuse the court and to tolerate the King's oppression. Until one evening, the King is presented—as a gift—with a dwarf woman named Trippetta (Mireille Mosse), whom he also humiliates. Unable to bear watching the abuse of Trippetta by the King and his seven ministers, Hop-Frog plots with her to escape from the castle during a lavish costume ball. On the night of the ball, Hop-Frog persuades the King and his ministers to go as escaped orangutans, and the dwarf himself provides their straw-covered costumes. When the King and the ministers enter the ballroom, Trippetta hoists them to the ceiling on a chandelier chain, and Hop-Frog sets fire to their costumes. As the King and his ministers perish in the flames, Hop-Frog and Trippetta make their escape.

Published in the last year of Poe's financially troubled life, "Hop-Frog" was probably inspired by an historical event recounted in Jean Froissart's Chronicles (c. 1400). In 1393, King Charles VI of France and five of his courtiers secretly attended a palace dance dressed in linen coats covered with tar

and flax. The outfits hid the nobles' identities and gave them the appearance of "savages." When an inquisitive celebrant approached the strange figures with a torch, the courtiers' costumes accidentally caught fire, killing four of them. The king himself narrowly escaped the blaze.[1] Arthur Hobson Quinn believes that Poe created "Hop-Frog" by combining this incident with an anonymous short story, "Frogère and the Emperor Paul," in which the Emperor of Russia plays a cruel trick on his jester and thereby precipitates his own death.[2]

Though well known within Poe's canon, "Hop-Frog" hasn't been scrutinized or autopsied by literary critics as often as the author's more celebrated works. Some have seen the title character as a reflection of Poe himself, as the suffering artist taking revenge upon an abusive and unappreciative public.[3] However, Poe only insinuates his sympathy for the dwarf jester by circumscribing the story's narrative through the eyes of a baffled courtier. The relationship between Hop-Frog and the King is obliquely and intriguingly conveyed by their behavior in front of the story's narrator. So, while the jester appears to hatch his murderous plot only in reaction to an infuriating but harmless insult (the King throws wine in Trippetta's face), the strained, discomforting interactions between Hop-Frog and the King silently suggest years of mistreatment heaped upon the dwarf.

If Poe intended to craft a vague allegory of his own life as a suffering artist, it's still a relief to see that "Hop-Frog" lacks any obvious self-pity. However, it isn't clear that Poe sees himself in the character of Hop-Frog. In the short story, the jester remains a rather disagreeable and inscrutable figure, not only because his motivations remain concealed from the narrator, but also because his climactic conflagration appears too extreme: the King's grisly punishment seems monstrously disproportionate to his offense.

In bringing "Hop-Frog" to the screen, Julie Taymor sought to make her audience understand the dwarf and "accept his ultimate retribution."[4] An Obie-winning theater director and a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation "genius" award, Taymor has experimented with puppetry, choreography, set and costume design—as well as stage direction—in Europe, Asia, and across the U.S. After seeing her off-Broadway production *Juan Darien: A Carnival Mass* (1989), the executive producer of "American Playhouse," Lindsay Law, approached her to direct a project for the series based on a work by an American writer, a project that would combine her diverse areas of interest. *Fool's Fire* is Taymor's first film.

Taymor enlarges Poe's story by expressionistically dwelling on court life through Hop-Frog's eyes. Where the short story only suggests its sympathy for the jester, *Fool's Fire* instantly sides with Hop-Frog and Trippetta by allowing its audience glimpses into their lives away from court. But the film takes its empathy with Hop-Frog and Trippetta one brazen step further: it portrays all non-dwarf roles with highly stylized life-size puppets. In fact, the film's entire mise-en-scène boldly proclaims its anti-naturalistic expressionism with minimalist sets, blatantly artificial backdrops, and striking camera angles, sometimes aided by high-definition video collages within the frame. Through its brilliant visual design and its scarcity of human faces, *Fool's Fire* immediately persuades its audience to identify with Hop-Frog and Trippetta—while it simultaneously criticizes the exploitation of these characters as objects of ridicule.

The exploitation of dwarfism, though, isn't limited to cruel kings. Even brilliant directors have sometimes created otherwise compelling films—Bergman's *The Silence* (1963), Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), and Fellini's many circus-inspired spectacles, for example—that fall back on reducing dwarfism to a signifier of strangeness. Other noteworthy films have foregrounded dwarf characters in one way or another, only to uphold stereotypical assumptions about them. Some movies have featured dwarfs who are prominent and likeable, but with the implicit assumption that little people are inherently incompatible with non-dwarf society (*Freaks*, 1932; *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, 1937). Some have emotionally empathic characters whose dwarfism signifies a non-human or superhuman status (*The Tin Drum*, 1979; *Time Bandits*, 1981; *Willow*, 1988), thus suggesting that dwarfs stand somewhere outside the human species. There are even a few films which have utilized all-dwarf casts, portraying an imaginary, ludicrous Lilliputian world where little people and taller people never come into contact (*The Terror of Tiny Town*, 1937; *Even Dwarfs Started Small*, 1970). Despite the empathy, concern, or compassion that these movies may show for their dwarf characters, the

Hop-Frog (center) entertaining the King and his ministers

stories all affirm little people as socially or biologically segregated from humanity "at large." In other words, dwarfs aren't human—they're intrinsically divorced from the world of "normally" proportioned people.

Rarely does a film present a dwarf as a flesh-and-blood person who is part of a broader human society. And even then, the dwarf's presence is still usually marginalized, consigned to being either a peripheral character (*W.C. Fields and Me*, 1976) or a "challenging" lead role for a versatile non-dwarf actor (*Moulin Rouge,* 1952). Although a few dwarf performers, such as Michael Dunn and Billy Barty, have carved out distinguished careers for themselves as character actors in the entertainment industry, none has acquired the power and prestige necessary to significantly reform the marginalized media image of little people.[5]

But rather than being seen as signifiers of the strange, supernatural, or insignificant, dwarfs may instead be seen for what they are: human beings with certain medical disorders. The most common dwarfisms are *achondroplasia* and *hypochondroplasia*, both of which shorten the limbs in relation to the torso. People with these disorders are technically dwarfs, while the term "midget" has been medically reserved for people of severely reduced stature with proportionate extremities. But many dwarfs and midgets object to the folkloric and demeaning connotations of these terms and prefer instead "little people," which emphasizes their humanity. However, because the word "dwarf" is more precise and more descriptive in the context of Taymor's film, it remains the most helpful term to use in my discussion.[6]

Fool's Fire instantly breaks away from the prevailing image of dwarfs by opening with a scene in Hop-Frog's home before he is captured by the King. In a modest, barely furnished rustic dwelling, Hop-Frog dines on soup with a small group of other dwarfs (identified in the credits as his parents and siblings). The mood is dignified, quiet, and solemn,

and the scene captures a rare spirit of communalism among little people without the imposition of ostentatious spectacle. However, this site of integrity is suddenly ruptured (emphasized by the repeated shattering of a soup pot) by the invasion of the King's troops. In the next sequence, we see Hop-Frog at court and in his jester's outfit for the first time. By preceding this scene with a view of Hop-Frog's life before he was forced to become a jester, the film sensitizes the viewer to the indignity of his station. And because the cruel King and his court are portrayed by life-size puppets, their features exaggerated by caricature, their inhumanity is manifested literally. This scene establishes Hop-Frog as our central human character, so we are encouraged to view the oversized kingdom through his discontented eyes.

By placing Hop-Frog and Trippetta at the serious center of its drama, and by revealing various aspects of their lives, *Fool's Fire* lets its audience observe these characters beyond their identities as shallow spectacle. We are encouraged to concentrate on their humanity and on their unwillingness to perform their demeaning social roles. The studious camera, instead of merely emphasizing some superficial "abnormalities" of dwarf features, enables us to absorb the empathic emotions behind Hop-Frog's and Trippetta's faces.

Mireille Mosse as Trippetta

Traditionally, character identification is used to elide perceptual issues. When focusing our empathy and narrative interest upon a fiction's central character, we frequently get so caught up in the character's behavior that we lose track of the elements which construct and reinforce the narrative and its underlying assumptions. To ease our identification, films will usually cast their lead roles with actors whose looks uphold dominant concepts of attractiveness. In many Hollywood screenplays, terms like "handsome," "beautiful," "rugged," and "gorgeous" are buzzwords to signal the male and female leads.[7] One cumulative tendency of this practice is to devalue those physical features which don't adhere to this—increasingly unattainable— dominant aesthetic. By consistently making people with only a narrow range of looks the protagonists of so many films, Hollywood risks leaving the tacit message that only "beautiful" people are worthy of our attention and interest.[8] So, in making a discontented dwarf the sympathetic central character of its story, *Fool's Fire* immediately calls our attention to both the routine invisibility of dwarfs as dramatic heroes and the overvaluing of physical appearance.

But the film doesn't stop at just letting us "relate" to these characters; it also urges us to question the dominant perception of the dwarf body as something ugly. In the scene where Hop-Frog makes a wooden chair for Trippetta, the camera first concentrates on the dwarf's hands as he begins to shape the wood. Then the lens slowly pulls back, gradually revealing his bare, burred torso—engaged in an affirmative act of creativity and power—for the first time. Finally catching a glimpse of a genuine human body in a world of puppets, the non-dwarf viewer may acknowledge the humanity of Hop-Frog's unusual physique. Rather than shocking us, Fellini-style, with the sudden sight of "physical deformity," *Fool's Fire* inspires us to contemplate the dwarf body as an active agent with its own integral beauty.

But more importantly, unlike the typical character played by the Hollywood matinee idol, Hop-Frog and Trippetta aren't heroes who uphold the

society in which they live. Instead, they represent a conquered people. Hop-Frog and Trippetta suffer a militaristic colonialism which marks their distinctive size as worthy of conquest. *Fool's Fire* thus emphasizes the connection between the cruelty of colonization and the cruelty of dwarfism-as-spectacle, explicitly linking the subjugation of the dwarf to the colonization of the Third World. In Susan Stewart's words:

> Often referred to as a "freak of nature," the freak, it must be emphasized, is a freak of culture. His or her anomalous status is articulated by the process of the spectacle as it distances the viewer, and thereby it "normalizes" the viewer as much as it marks the freak as an aberration. . . . We find the freak inextricably tied to the cultural other—the Little Black Man, the Turkish horse, the Siamese twins. . . . The body of the cultural other is . . . both naturalized and domesticated in a process we might consider to be characteristic of colonization in general. For all colonization involves the taming of the beast by bestial methods and hence both the conversion and projection of the animal and human, difference and identity. On display, the freak represents the naming of the frontier and the assurance that the wilderness, the outside, is now territory.[9]

Allowing the viewer to identify with Hop-Frog and Trippetta as fellow human beings, *Fool's Fire*, unlike most films with dwarf characters, shrinks the discriminatory distance between dwarfism-as-spectacle and the spectator. The film thereby questions the "natural" distinction between the two. Only with great difficulty can the non-dwarf viewer preserve a sense of disconnected superiority over the film's dwarf protagonists. Here, Taymor suggests a perceptual openness intrinsic to character involvement, a visceral versatility that reclaims narrative identification from strict servitude to the dominant ideology.

Because Hop-Frog and Trippetta are a conquered people, not only are they placed outside the ruling society, but as "cultural others" their humanity is denied. The King refers to Hop-Frog as "my monkey" and forces him to wear a spiked dog collar, while Trippetta is presented in the costume and cage of a bird. Burdened with the names and trappings of domesticated animals, Hop-Frog and Trippetta are forced to display themselves as creatures outside the human species. The ruling class, then, refuses to recognize its own animal nature as part of the human species and, instead, displaces all animal characteristics onto the politically disadvantaged. (Although in Taymor's film, since the members of the ruling class are played by puppets, their denial of their own animality is also an affirmation of their literal lack of humanity.) Here, the film incisively confronts and condemns the dehumanization of dwarfs typically taken for granted in the media.

In a more conventional narrative, Hop-Frog and Trippetta might have worked to become part of the ruling society, worked to expand its boundaries to liberally include those initially outside its dominant aesthetic. Instead, Hop-Frog and Trippetta, as conquered people, see no redeeming value in the conquering society. Rather than reform it, they subvert it by using its powers of dehumanization against itself: they turn the King and his ministers into orangutans, "wild beasts." The film's heroes first "bring down" the ruling class by affirming its animality, toppling its illusions of biological separatism. Then, they bring it down again by overthrowing it, incinerating the King and his ministers.

Here, Taymor skillfully fulfills her goal of letting the audience understand Hop-Frog's actions. While the reader of Poe's story might be taken aback by the dwarf jester's extreme reaction to the King's insulting behavior, Taymor places the act of vengeance in a compelling political context. As a representative of the Third World, Hop-Frog is not just an individual responding to a single affront: his plot against the King becomes an act of liberation from colonial tyranny. The vengeance isn't merely against the insult to Trippetta but rather against the conquest and enslavement of Hop-Frog's people. And though the structuring absences in Poe's short story allow the reader to reach this same conclusion more subtly, Taymor's film remains a marvellous achievement for brilliantly visualizing and dramatizing what Poe left to the imagination.

Linking the audiovisual stereotyping of dwarfs to a conquering, dehumanizing tyranny—a tyranny that must be destroyed—*Fool's Fire* intriguingly implies that our old perceptions must also be destroyed, that old ways of seeing based on visual

prejudice, political domination, and social hierarchy have nothing of value to offer. Through its empathy with its dwarf protagonists, and through its fascinating visual design, Taymor's film urges its audience to reconsider dominant concepts of appearance and beauty, how they function as agents of oppression. Perhaps then the viewer can begin to disavow the visually prejudicial and begin to perceive the world in new ways.

Yet, for all its virtues, *Fool's Fire* still doesn't show little people as part of a broader human society. The film instead encourages its audience to identify with Hop-Frog and Trippetta by setting them against a hideously caricatured world. This reflects the extremity of the dwarf's marginalization in our discriminatory culture: only by portraying "tall" people as monstrous, misshapen Goliaths can Taymor get her audience to relate to the dwarf characters as fellow human beings. Here, the film tears down appearance-prejudice against little people—only to let the life-size puppets uphold the viewer's aversion to the physically unusual. Furthermore, by having the King and his courtiers portrayed by synthetic puppets, Taymor, with the best of intentions, upholds the illusory biological and social segregation between dwarfs and non-dwarfs.

If *Fool's Fire* had shown its dwarf characters as an integral part of a diverse human community, rather than as an insular "race" of conquered people, maybe the film could have expanded the representation of dwarfism as a part of human society. Taymor might have drawn on Mikhail Bakhtin's assessment of François Rabelais and offered a celebratory, carnivalesque vision that utilized the dwarf body to directly criticize the construct of classical beauty. Ironically, both Poe and Taymor do indeed draw upon Rabelais, but not Bakhtin's Rabelais. Poe mentions *Gargantua* by name as a book that would suit the King's lack of refinement,[10] and Taymor puts passages from Rabelais into the mouths of the King and his courtiers to verbalize their excessive consumption and selfish salaciousness. Apparently taking its cue from Poe, Taymor's film maintains Rabelais's reputation as a wanton hedonist, the reputation that Bakhtin fervently argues against.[11]

Still, in *Fool's Fire* the film world has finally found a drama that recognizes little people not only as discontented members of the Third World but also as the active controllers of their own destinies. Even though the film may contain some minor conceptual limitations, its acknowledgement of the dwarf's oppressed status powerfully counters the strangeness, the ridicule, and the disregard that constantly plague the popular image of little people. Taymor's film, then, marks a significant step away from audiovisual stereotypes—but it's only the first step toward an empowering portrayal of little people as full-fledged human beings, as adults who visibly and actively contribute to contemporary society. And while it also reminds us how far we still have to go to overcome our adoration of surface appearances, *Fool's Fire* stands as a hopeful sign of progress for those of us who live in a world always built to someone else's size.

ROBERT M. PAYNE

■ Robert M. Payne, a Los Angeles-based writer, has contributed articles on film and video to such publications as *Jump Cut*, *East-West Film Journal*, and the *New Art Examiner*.

Notes

1. Sir John [*sic*] Froissart, *Chronicles of England, France, Spain, and the Adjoining Countries, from the Latter Part of the Reign of Edward II to the Coronation of Henry IV* (c. 1400), trans. Thomas Johnes, esq. (New York: Leavitt and Allen, 1855), pp. 557–58. This event would be dated 1392 by the old calendar.
2. Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1941), p. 596.
3. For example, see Stuart and Susan Levine, eds., *The Short Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976), p. 252.
4. Julie Taymor, "'Fool's Fire,' Airing on *American Playhouse* March 25, Is 'World Where Theatre Meets Cinema,'" press release, n.d., p. 2.
5. Billy Barty, however, has made some concerted efforts off-screen to organize for the rights and concerns of little people. In 1975, he established the Billy Barty Foundation, an organization devoted to legal advocacy, medical referrals, and non-show-business scholarships for people of short stature. But despite its commendable work, the Foundation's goal of making little people an accepted part of mainstream society has yet to be fully realized. For more information, the Billy Barty Foundation can be reached at 929 West Olive Avenue, Suite C, Burbank, California 91506. (818) 953–5410.

6. I have a condition called *spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia tarda*, which compresses the vertebrae and thereby shortens the torso, while leaving the limbs unaffected. This dwarfism leaves me standing under five feet tall. Though technically a dwarf, I'm not faced with the more considerable day-to-day challenges confronting those with *achondroplasia* and *hypochondroplasia*. Therefore, I don't presume to speak for other little people. This is why I refer to dwarfs as "they" rather than "we."
7. I make this observation based upon my experience as a script-reader for a Hollywood production company.
8. This message is abetted by publicity outlets like *People* magazine's annual survey, "The Fifty Most Beautiful People in the World," which almost exclusively profiles actors and models who live in industrially developed countries, people prized for their physical appearance over their accomplishments.
9. Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 109–10.
10. Edgar Allan Poe, "Hop-Frog" (1849), in *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), p. 283.
11. But even turning to Bakhtin, one still finds little affirmative acknowledgement of dwarfism. Although he takes great pains to argue for a positive reassessment of the "grotesque," Bakhtin constantly couches his most profound observations in the language of enormity. He writes glowingly about the body that "outgrows itself," the body that "transgresses its own limits," and the carnivalesque exaggeration of body size. Although Bakhtin's writings are open enough to allow interpretations that would include dwarfism as a positive agent of the grotesque, his championing of enormity belies the severe marginalization of dwarfism in the discourse of liberation. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), esp. pp. 26, 306, 317.

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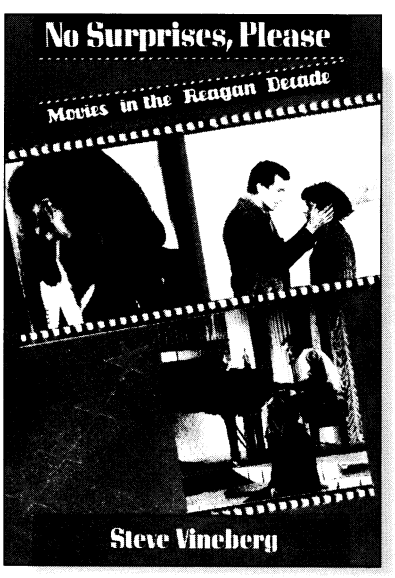

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Unforgiven

Director/Producer: Clint Eastwood. Executive Producer: David Valdes. Screenplay: David Webb Peoples. Cinematographer: Jack N. Green. Production Designer: Henry Bumstead. Music: Lennie Niehaus. Warner Bros.

After enduring a child's cruel death, the composer/hero of Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus* is moved to write a piece which will subvert the ebullient optimism of the "Ode To Joy" and "take back" Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Mann's oddly potent phrase springs to mind after viewing Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven*, the sixteenth film of an uneven but never uninteresting directorial career.

A number of "against-the-grain" Westerns have questioned the near-sacred conventions of this most American of mythical movielands. Earlier pictures in the vein include Henry King's *The Gunfighter* and John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*; later examples, crafted during the fertile period of genre interrogation that flourished in the climate of 1960s and 1970s anti-authoritarianism, are Sergio Leone's Spaghetti Westerns, Robert Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, and Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid.*

These impressive pictures, and Eastwood's own previous revisionist explorations (as actor in Leone's films and *Hang 'Em High*; as director, notably of the blistering *High Plains Drifter*), stand as apt preludes to his definitive "taking back" of every sagebrush shibboleth in *Unforgiven*. Its deconstructive task is accomplished with such fierce intelligence, mordant wit, and formal beauty as to place it within the pantheon of the genre's finest achievements.

Unforgiven is set in classic Ford and Peckinpah territory: Big Whiskey, Montana, a speck of 1880s town pressed under a vast sweep of sky and mountain, whose wilder days are grudgingly giving way to the encroachments of civilization. A few ramshackle stores crowd muddy streets—real axle-busting muck in Eastwood's unadorned take, not Leone's artfully dappled filth. But the railroad stops here, and the telegraph fitfully connects the town with the wider world. A honky-tonk saloon features rotgut and "billiards"—the appellation part in-joke, part sop to local bluenoses. The pool tables are long gone; a harem of complacent trollops service cowboys from the nearby ranches in for a toot.

No church is seen in Big Whiskey, nor God mentioned. The daunting milieu presented by David Peoples' script exists in a kind of moral pre-history, where raw aggression is regularly answered by talion vengeance. *Macbeth* and *Lear* are not far from the conception.

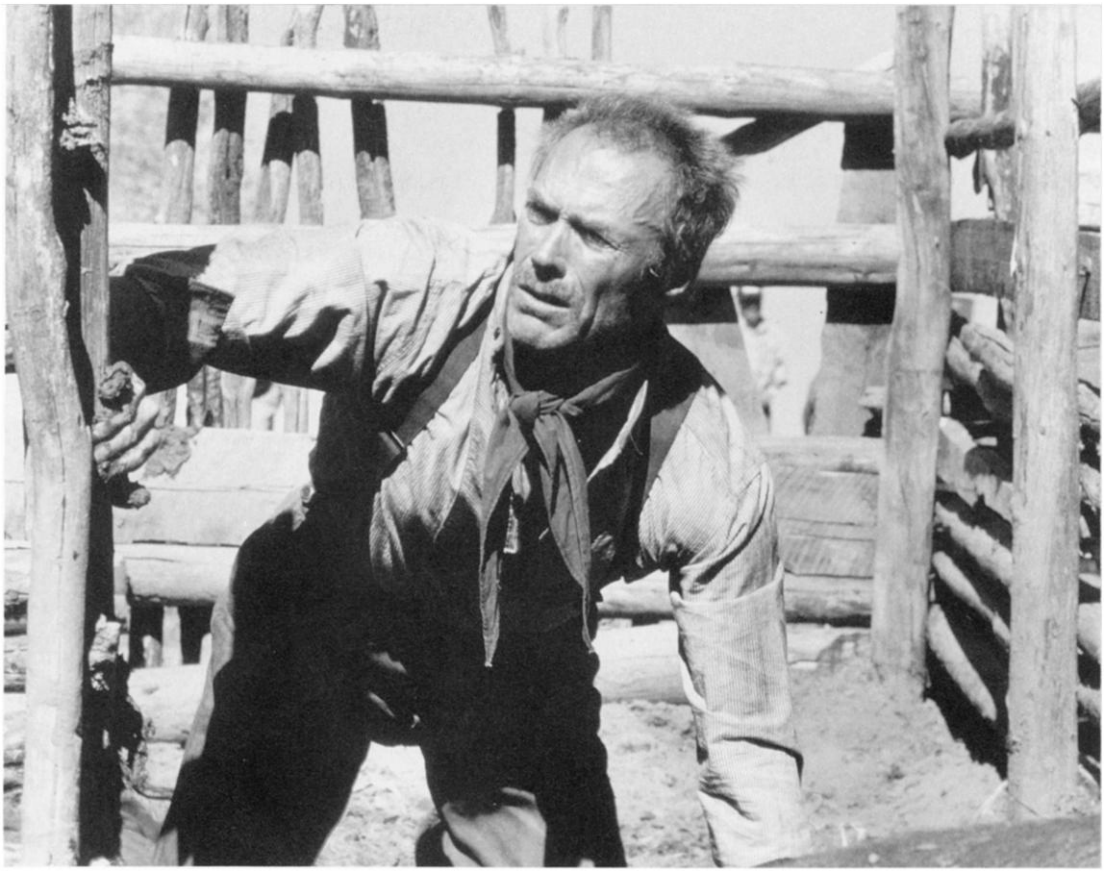
The presiding arbiter of justice in this dusty outpost is Little Bill Daggett, sheriff in the Wyatt Earp mold: not the inhumanly upright lawman of Ford's *My Darling Clementine* but the real-time amoralist who congenially allied himself with both business and criminal elements, keeping the peace and his pockets lined at the same time. Shrewdly played by Gene Hackman, Daggett enjoys summary power over his tumbleweed fief more than profit. His façade of deceptive bonhomie conceals a bullying brutality which explodes whenever his notion of benevolent despotism is thwarted.

In the vivid establishing sequence, the unerotic humping of a young wrangler and a brothel escort is interrupted by screams. An older drunken buddy, enraged by his girl's friendly gibes about his small penis, has set about slashing her face.

Daggett is summoned; to the women's dismay, he proposes letting the cowboys off with a whipping. According to his unthinking (and all too familiar) bias, they're not hard cases—just working men out for a good time who went wild under the influence. A hard thrashing, he argues, is no mean punishment. The pimp/proprietor protests: a disfigured whore is of little value. He's paid to have her shipped West, and deserves fair recompense for a ruined investment. Daggett smoothly shifts gears and assesses the cowboys nearly all their precious stock of horses, proceeds of sale to the pimp.

The sheriff's situational ethics, valuing property over person, seem eminently fair—to the men. But the girls, enraged at being so publicly rated as mere goods, damaged or otherwise (it's likely their easy compliance and enforced gaiety have usually softened this issue for buyer and seller), secretly put up a thousand dollars for any hired gun willing to kill the cowboys. (According to the most primitive construction of guilt by contiguity, both men are deemed equally criminal, although the younger tried to restrain the older.)

Their defiance and Daggett's equable sexism together wind up a fatal mainspring. Retribution,



Unforgiven: Clint Eastwood as retired gunfighter William Munny

slow of foot, yet grimmer than anyone could imagine, has been set in motion. *Unforgiven* will turn to its own subversive purposes Leone's typical trope of righteous retribution doubly devastating for its twisting deferral. Feminine wrongs fuel the vengeance machine, as is often the case in Leone's cinema. (Eastwood's movies often portray woman as perennial disturber of the status quo, whether predator—*Play Misty for Me*—or victim—*Sudden Impact*. Here, his sympathy is poignantly unambivalent.)

Nemesis rides by the name of William Munny, a notorious desperado who found redemption in the arms of a young woman of good family. The opening titles indicate that she died several years ago, leaving him with two children and a failing pig farm. Eastwood plays Munny as his Man With No Name or Outlaw Josey Wales, dwindled down to a bereft, unhinged wreck with a queer masochistic streak. He's visited by a young bravo barely past his growth who styles himself the Schofield Kid. The Kid has heard of Munny's murderous reputation and wants him as a partner in killing the whore's persecutors and sharing the reward.

Munny demurs; he seems content on his dunghill, obscurely savoring his condition as another signet of atonement for his foul past. In Eastwood's finely tuned interpretation, Munny has the knack of some reformed ex-sinners for inspiring boredom, irritation, and eventual mistrust. One doesn't doubt the intensity of his grief, but his monotonous recounting of his wife's goodness gradually acquires a faintly spurious edge, just as the repeated insistence that he's "just like anyone else" begins to ring as hollow reassurance. He's clearly papered a socialized veneer over an antisocial morass.

After the Kid departs, Munny talks himself into tracking down the cowboys, the decision spurred by his children's neediness and the Kid's macabre tall tale of the whore's horrible disfigurement, which encrusts a truth terrible enough in its own right. *Unforgiven* (unlike Eastwood's other Westerns) persistently asks us to ponder the danger of mythifying reality to justify questionable acts—including the act of watching such entertainments.

Munny enlists a former partner in crime, sharpshooter Ned Logan (the estimable Morgan Freeman), in the hunt. Logan is not wild to go, joining his friend not so much for gain but rather out of loyalty and nostalgia for the bad old days. After several hard nights on the trail (another demystified myth: sound sleep under a blanket of stars), Munny sickens; he begins to hallucinate the blasted faces of men he's shot. In this appalling state, he wanders into Big

The injured prostitute (Anna Thomson) tends her defender

Whiskey and onto Daggett's saloon turf. The sheriff administers a catastrophic beating, while sententiously denouncing "assassins and men of low character" who've invaded the town for the reward. Munny submits to grinding humiliation with the usual—for him—masochistic passivity.

His abasement is imbued with the quality of ritualized, Christ-like suffering seen in other Eastwood movies. However, a radically different epiphany occurs than the usual rise from the dust to punish unregenerate wickedness in triumphant combat. After the disfigured prostitute nurses him back to health, Munny pragmatically contrives to kill the hapless cowboys by stealth, with a dogged purposefulness that intensifies as his companions' resolve falters.

Logan first wounds the innocent youngster, firing from a distant ridge, then can't bring himself to finish the job. Munny takes the rifle and—going for the fast kill—drills the boy through the gut. Sickened by this agonizing death, Logan decides to return home.

Cued by Munny, the agitated Kid (a marvelous turn by newcomer Jaimz Woolvett) guns the older cowboy down while he squats in a privy. At first the Kid exults out of pure blood lust, then awakens to anguished remorse as Munny muses laconically that "When you kill a man, you take away all he's got, all he'll ever get." In the cowboys' dispatch, Eastwood confronts us with death in the fullness of its pain, absurdity, and squalor—again giving the lie to the legend of quick death in six-gun glory which the director himself so extravagantly helped to create.

His illusions blasted, the shaken Kid departs, refusing his share of the reward. Logan meanwhile is caught, and dies under Daggett's merciless interrogation. Munny had said the vile deeds of his past were perpetrated in a maddened haze of booze. Marriage taught him sobriety. Hearing about Logan's murder, he reaches again for the bottle.

Rather than debilitating him, alcohol seems almost to accentuate the steely clarity of his recovery after Daggett's punishment has brought him to abject debasement. The artificial constraints imposed by his wife's "goodness" are swept away. He awakens to his own innate destructiveness—a perverse cure indeed, reminding one of Lucifer's affirmation that it's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

Amidst ominous roiling of thunder, Munny rides back into Big Whiskey. One almost smells the whiff of brimstone as he trots by the upright casket in which Logan's grisly corpse is exhibited; it seems to float eerily out of focus in the frame's periphery. The scene plays as a gallows-humor reversal of Shane's climax, Jack Palance returning to town to

face down Alan Ladd. Munny steps into the saloon, tersely acknowledges Daggett's accusation that he's a heartless slayer of men, women, and children—he declares he's always had good luck with killing—then blows away pimp, sheriff, and deputies with one ghastly fusillade.

No one else will dare face the resurrected outlaw. The devastated citizens spill into the stormswept streets, amongst them W. W. Beauchamp, a dime novelist obviously modeled after Ned Buntline, the hack who glorified Earp, Bat Masterson, and other nasties of the day for legions of adoring fans back East. Beauchamp first appears as a chronicler of the infamous English Bob (Richard Harris, in a role that makes hilarious use of Harris's penchant for scenery-chewing). He switches allegiance to Daggett after the latter rides the erstwhile "Duke of Death" out of town.

Beauchamp supposed the Sheriff to be the authentic rawhide item, his accounts of gunslinging more "truthful" (Daggett's tales were a shade less fanciful than Bob's blather, but no less self-serving). Now the scribbler quails before the very thing itself: the saloon charnel house has served up a truth more awful than his overblown fiction could bear. Beauchamp's appearance is obviously citified, and he speaks contemporary English rather than the script's prevailing old West idiom. Eastwood punishes us with him for our yen for the show of gratuitous violence, echoing Hitchcock's punishment of the "irresponsible audience"'s vicarious voyeurism in *Psycho*.

Vowing he'll return to slaughter young and old unless his friend receives a decent burial, Munny vanishes, not into sunset but darkness, his proper habitation. *Unforgiven's* apocalyptic conclusion constitutes an insanely logical outcome—and send-up—of the bellicose John Wayne machismo so frequently celebrated by the genre. Since the whore's joke about the cowboy's limited endowment made

Retribution

him engrave a masculine protest upon her features, braggarts like the Schofield Kid, English Bob, and Daggett have been contending with guns or fists to prove who owns the biggest prick in town.

Savaged by the loss of wife and friend, shriven of guilt by his recuperation into withering, sociopathic nihilism, Munny no longer needs any such paltry proof—if he ever needed it at all. Scorning the phallic carnival, particularly detesting Daggett for his windy hubris, he administers the final castration. As he towers over the dying sheriff, Daggett groans: "I don't deserve this—I was building a house. . . ." Munny replies: "Deserve's got nothing to do with it," and finishes him off. Here Eastwood himself has passed beyond critiquing empty phallic narcissism into more elemental territory. By expunging Daggett—who despite his faults held things together—and the deputies, Munny destroys the barely civilized town's minimal ability to enforce its social contract.

There is, however, a quiet footnote to *Unforgiven*'s unrelenting and finalizing violence. The film ends with a long shot of Munny, silhouetted by his wife's grave, as a crawl states his subsequent fate was obscure. Rumor had it that he moved further west with his children, set up a store; his wife's mother eventually visited the territory to discover why her daughter had married him, and failed.

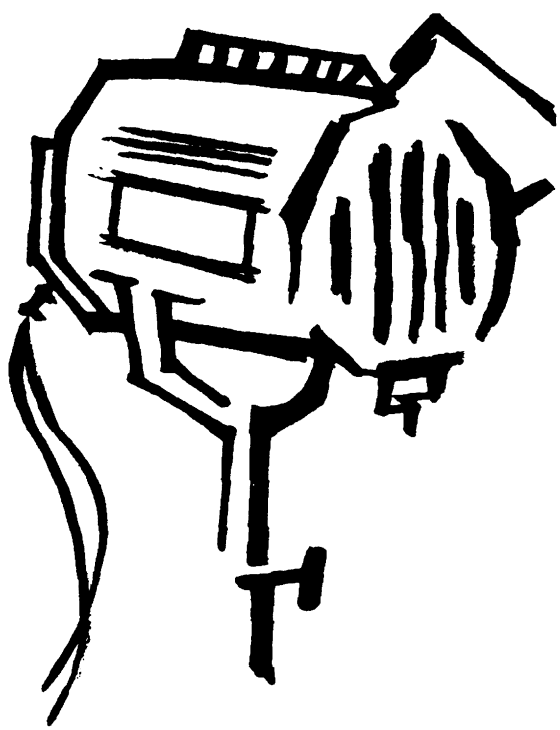
One spin on this problematic coda would be that Munny managed to wend his way back from the catastrophe he wrought upon Big Whiskey to resume some sort of domesticated life again. However, it seems more consistent with Eastwood's subversive intentions that the coda should expose the mythmaking apparatus already busily at work, softening into more "acceptable" obscurity the baleful spectacle of Munny's frightening rehabilitation which mocks the optimistic dream of the American frontier, indeed any dream of inevitable progress.

Unforgiven underscores how fragile a reed is civilization, with no omnipotent hero on a white horse or in a cop car to redeem the threat of humanity's supreme undefendedness. The indomitable thrust to push back the frontier, tame the wilderness, "build houses," seems pitiable or risible against this recognition. Eastwood here starkly foregrounds a profoundly conservative vision elsewhere embedded in his work (notably the *Dirty Harry* series). It informs the Freud of *Civilization and its Discontents*; has been adumbrated on screen by Kubrick in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *A Clockwork Orange*, and *Full Metal Jacket;* by Kurosawa in *Ran* and *Kagemusha* (Eastwood does not balk at viewing the work of other directors; it would be no surprise if *Unforgiven* reflects his take on Kurosawa's recent grandly pessimistic canvases).

With terrible rigor, *Unforgiven* asserts that our attempts to wrestle existence into a semblance of order will inevitably be undone by the savage instincts lurking within our natures, as well as by the coolness of Nature at large to our small purposes. Viewed against this harsh premise, William Munny appears galactically remote indeed from John Wayne triumphalist pieties. His character actualizes the revolt against social stricture latent in many earlier Eastwood protagonists. His bloody toppling of Big Whiskey's rule far exceeds the justified thirst for revenge of the Western's standard-issue rugged individualist. It seems rather compelled by the pure savor of misrule for its own sake.

HARVEY R. GREENBERG

■ Harvey R. Greenberg is Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and author of *Movies on Your Mind.*



Book Reviews

Patterns of Time

Mizoguchi and the 1930s

By Donald Kirihara. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992. $50.00 cloth; $24.95 paper.

Although Mizoguchi Kenji has long been considered one of the major Japanese film directors, he has never received "equal time" among film scholars writing in Western languages. Volumes devoted to Ozu and Kurosawa fill the shelves, but one has to look harder to locate copies of Keiko McDonald's 1984 Twayne publication on Mizoguchi, or Dudley and Paul Andrew's *Kenji Mizoguchi: A Guide to References and Resources* (1981), not to mention Daniel Serceau's *Mizoguchi: De la révolte aux songes* (1983). Now, with Donald Kirihara's *Patterns of Time: Mizoguchi and the 1930s*, a critical portion of this great director's career has been given the attention it deserves.

Kirihara sets as his goal an investigation of "the practices and strategies" of Mizoguchi's films, focusing on four films from the 1930s: *The Downfall of Osen* (*Orizuru osen*, 1935) *Naniwa Elegy* (*Naniwa erejī* [*Naniwa hika*], 1936), *Sisters of the Gion* (*Gion no shimai*, 1936), and *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* (*Zangiku monogatari*, 1939). Before embarking on a richly detailed analysis of these films, Kirihara positions Mizoguchi's films from the 1930s within the international film culture of Japan. He argues that Japan has been more involved with the wider international film world, and with the international art world in general, than many have claimed, and he takes pains to show how Mizoguchi participated in the heady mix of tradition and innovation that was the Japanese film world of the 1930s, prior to the worst years of wartime censorship.

Kirihara explores Mizoguchi's work as representative of a particular kind of Japanese film-making and also as a richly personal, somewhat idiosyncratic vision. Not content to merely state that there is a conflict of norms in Mizoguchi's films, he discusses the director's stylistic innovations in relation to the upheavals in the Japanese film industry in the 1920s and 1930s and to other historical events that provided external norms for the development of Mizoguchi's art. He also places the analysis of Mizoguchi's films within the terms of the parametric mode described by David Bordwell and Noël Burch (although he argues against what he calls the "oppositional framework" imposed on Japanese cinema by Burch).

While elaborating on the way Mizoguchi moved between studios and between genres throughout his career, Kirihara refutes the common notion that this was merely the result of opportunism. He also refutes the belief that the "long take" was necessarily a distinctive feature of Mizoguchi's style. Instead, Kirihara discusses several "large-scale patterns" in Mizoguchi's films, such as the use of expositional gaps and flashbacks to "force a slowdown in causal relations, allowing the style to 'rise' and inviting viewer activity" (71), or the repetition of a locale shot that, surprisingly, disorients the viewer because of major stylistic alterations in each subsequent shooting of the same space. Particularly striking is Kirihara's discussion of Mizoguchi's pictorial bent, which led him to draw on traditions of parallel (or isometric) perspective found in Japanese art to entice the viewer's eye.

One senses the influence of Kirihara's mentor, David Bordwell, in the structure and analyses of this study. Visually, this book also bears a close resemblance to other University of Wisconsin film studies publications, such as Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*. At times, these factors detract from the sense of this particular text's uniqueness. Although some of the black-and-white illustrations are rather small and blurred, *Patterns of Time* offers us some rare stills of the director as a young man and of actual filming situations. The cover still, from *Sisters of the Gion*, is particularly apt for a director who was known for the way he presented women as beautiful witnesses to the vicissitudes of life and men as basically undistinguished or, at best, half-asleep.

When writing about the relationship between Mizoguchi and his co-workers, Kirihara stresses the director's unreasonable demands and constant search for perfection. These qualities were certainly present in the making of a Mizoguchi film, but what fails to come across as clearly is the sense of gratitude many of these co-workers had for Mizoguchi's artistic guidance, despite (or because of) its rigor.

These kinds of facts come to light through Japanese sources such as Shindō Kaneto's full-length documentary about Mizoguchi, *Aru eiga kantoku no shōgai* (*The Life of a Film Director*, 1976). Shindō's award-winning film and accompanying written text are not mentioned in the bibliography of Kirihara's book, although several other important Japanese critical essays do appear as citations in their French translation, or in Leonard Schrader's unpublished English translation of Japanese writings about the director. Kirihara does draw on a wide range of sources to explain Mizoguchi's world view and films, including Kawaguchi Matsutarō, Yoda Yoshikata, Tzvetan Todorov, Meir Sternberg, E.H. Gombrich, André Bazin, and Jan Mukarovsky.

Mizoguchi was, ultimately, a very *ningen-kusai* director, as critic Okada Susumu described him in a 1961 *Kinema Junpō* article. This phrase, *ningen kusai* (literally "smelling of humanity"), is difficult to translate into English except by words like "humanistic," with an additional undertone of violent passion and liveliness of imagination. Kirihara hints at these traits but, with his concentration on stylistic and historical issues, tends to minimalize them.

Kirihara is particularly adept at pointing to sources for the sense of mystery and paradox in Mizoguchi's films. He notes that the narration of films like *Naniwa Elegy* displays both an omniscience and a self-conscious reticence, and his interpretations of the controversial final sequences of *Sisters of the Gion* and *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* in terms of these two qualities shed light on sequences that have been criticized as either overly explicit or overly ambiguous.

Mizoguchi Kenji was, as one film scholar once admitted to me, a "slippery" director, defying simple analysis. Now, with Donald Kirihara's meticulous scholarship, we can turn to the Mizoguchi films of the 1930s with the level of understanding and contextual awareness which has previously been reserved for his films of the 1950s.

LINDA EHRLICH

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Columbia Pictures

Portrait of a Studio

Edited by Bernard Dick. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991. $30.00.

Columbia was once called the germ of the ocean; it still is the bane of the film historian. The only major studio whose history has not received major scholarly treatment, Columbia Pictures is also a deceptively simple subject.

Like Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Bros., and M-G-M, Columbia enjoyed continuous executive supervision through the late 1950s and Harry Cohn's well-attended funeral. But given Cohn's shrewd management style and the studio's underdog competitiveness, its best films frequently came from one-picture deals and independents. Or they imitated other studio styles, producing a variety that equalled the output of makeshift entities like RKO or United Artists. But no studio archives are generally available, and so Columbia's internal dynamics must be construed externally.

Bernard F. Dick's *Columbia Pictures: Portrait of a Studio* takes its starting point from these obstacles and anomalies and purports to show what makes a Columbia film a product distinctly Columbian. "While studio history cannot explain a film's artistic merit," Dick notes in his preface, "it can explain the circumstances that made such art possible." Delineating those circumstances is a task that Dick, the author of excellent books on Joseph Mankiewicz, the Hollywood Ten, and the World War II film, tackles in a lengthy business history of the studio. A diverse group of scholars (from, as Dick notes, "literature, American studies, communications, film and foreign languages") contributes new essays on its stars, genres, and specific films.

Dick's use of the word "portrait" in his book's title is apt. The volume is not a comprehensive history of Columbia but rather a series of isolated snapshots inflected by the particular author's interests. Perhaps Dick intended for readers to veer between the essays on specific genres, films, and stars—and Dick's own 63-page studio history—to see how studio policy produces Columbia's films. In any case, the book lacks an analytical synthesis of the pertinent aspects of studio management, style, star, and genre best typified by Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System*. The primary value of *Columbia Pictures*, by contrast, is textbook convenience, but even this is limited.

The essays are uneven. With the exception of Ruth Prigozy's lively essay on Judy Holliday's place in 1950s American culture, Jeanine Basinger's piece on *Anatomy of a Murder*, Jim Welsh's sociologically informed discussion of *A Soldier's Story*, and Janice Moulton's fascinating analysis of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, the bulk of these essays retread old ground. Some of them do it with verve: Charles Maland's overview of Frank Capra's association with the studio, J.P. Telotte's discussion of Columbia's bricolage with films noirs like *Dead Reckoning*, and Joy Gould Boyum's spirited claims for the superiority of Columbia's screwball comedies are model syntheses of their subjects that relate the films to the studio's management policies.

But Dick excused the other contributors who analyze single films (*On the Waterfront, Anatomy of a Murder, Lawrence of Arabia, Easy Rider, Taxi Driver, The Big Chill*, and *Bob, Carol, Ted and Alice*) from making such connections. Why and how were these titles made at Columbia? Presumably, they could have been made anywhere under different circumstances, a fact which undercuts the rationale for the book. Then, too, we get no sense of Dick's criteria (box-office performance? Academy Awards?) for selecting articles on *these* films. Why not *The Lady from Shanghai*? *The Reckless Moment*? *All the King's Men*? *The Big Heat*? *Dr. Strangelove*? *Five Easy Pieces*? Finally, like Columbia's output, the essays Dick solicited vary in quality: most of them are highly readable

Mizoguchi was, ultimately, a very *ningen-kusai* director, as critic Okada Susumu described him in a 1961 *Kinema Junpō* article. This phrase, *ningen kusai* (literally "smelling of humanity"), is difficult to translate into English except by words like "humanistic," with an additional undertone of violent passion and liveliness of imagination. Kirihara hints at these traits but, with his concentration on stylistic and historical issues, tends to minimalize them.

Kirihara is particularly adept at pointing to sources for the sense of mystery and paradox in Mizoguchi's films. He notes that the narration of films like *Naniwa Elegy* displays both an omniscience and a self-conscious reticence, and his interpretations of the controversial final sequences of *Sisters of the Gion* and *The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum* in terms of these two qualities shed light on sequences that have been criticized as either overly explicit or overly ambiguous.

Mizoguchi Kenji was, as one film scholar once admitted to me, a "slippery" director, defying simple analysis. Now, with Donald Kirihara's meticulous scholarship, we can turn to the Mizoguchi films of the 1930s with the level of understanding and contextual awareness which has previously been reserved for his films of the 1950s.

LINDA EHRLICH

■ Linda Ehrlich is Assistant Professor of Japanese and Cinema at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Columbia Pictures

Portrait of a Studio

Edited by Bernard Dick. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991. $30.00.

Columbia was once called the germ of the ocean; it still is the bane of the film historian. The only major studio whose history has not received major scholarly treatment, Columbia Pictures is also a deceptively simple subject.

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MATTHEW BERNSTEIN

■ Matthew Bernstein is Assistant Professor of Film Studies at Emory University.

Bette Davis

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Readers familiar with Barbara Leaming only as the author of a relatively restrained and useful Orson Welles biography are in for a shock with her lurid new vision of Bette Davis.

La Bette has been done dirty before, most notably by her own daughter, B.D. Hyman, in *My Mother's Keeper*, but Leaming pulls out all stops. She offers a pathetic creature, indulged and insecure since childhood, who became a rampaging monster in Hollywood and in what passed for her home life. Leaming presents episode after sordid episode of the star's unfulfilled personal life—sex (often with directors) as one-upsmanship; abortion and marriages for practical reasons; bizarre family messes swamped in alcoholism and violent megalomania.

At one point there is an entire chapter of 12 pages drawn from a transcript of a private dinner bringing together Davis and Mae West. The two screen legends had never met. It was late in their lives. Davis, drinking heavily, behaved badly, very badly. Their thoroughly amazing conversation was recorded by the bartender, "the microphone concealed behind the ice bucket." There, in sum, is the texture of the book.

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A similar statement may be made about the articles themselves. Although only one of the articles was not previously published, the reader would be forced to sift through numerous publications and periodicals (*Film Quarterly, Public Culture, Filmviews, Continuum*, etc.), not all of which are easily obtainable, to track them down. The convenience of this new edition more than justifies its modest price.

The editor has succeeded admirably in collecting articles by most of the more influential writers in English on Chinese film. If one objective was to gather a sampling of current approaches and "problematiques," in this too he has done well: film and literature, economic and political analysis, film and visual arts, gender in film, cross-cultural analysis all find their place here, as well as some of the first attempts in English to deal with the vast but hitherto unexplored territory of the popular cinema in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, by Jenny Kwok Wah Lau and Chiao Hsiung-ping.

Perspectives on Chinese Cinema is also being marketed as a textbook for classes on Chinese film, together with videotapes of representative Chinese films, including the rarely seen classic *Crows and Sparrows* (*Wuya yu maque*, 1949). The eclectic and specialized nature of this anthology might make it difficult for some to use as an introductory textbook, but it seems to be aimed at Film Studies majors venturing into Asian cinema rather than Asian Studies majors trying to understand more about China through film. The editor promotes this expanded edition as celebrating the emergence of "Chinese film studies within academia," but readily admits the continuing lack of an authoritative overview of the field in English. The articles dealing with film history, such as those by Leo Ou-fan Lee and Paul Clark, are still too circumscribed and specialized to provide an adequate background for understanding the other articles. As a textbook it would be most useful to readers with a considerable background in modern Chinese cultural history as well as a sophisticated understanding of current trends in film theory.

Not surprisingly, the level of sophistication in the book varies greatly from article to article. Some writers come equipped with sufficient experience in film analysis to conjure up wonders of technical jargon before the eyes of the amazed reader; others, from a background in Chinese cultural studies, plod more methodically through a somewhat marshy terrain, locating bits of firmer ground for those who follow. It is interesting to note that no sooner are the dazzling techniques of contemporary Western analysis applied to Chinese films than their applicability is questioned, as in the articles of Esther Yau and E. Ann Kaplan. These pioneering scholars take it upon themselves to earnestly question the validity of what most philologically oriented scholars rejected out of hand decades ago.

While this new edition does not fill any of the existing gaps in Chinese film studies, it does accurately represent the current state of affairs. Even after the currently trendy topics of popular contention have been put aside and forgotten, much of the solid research in this volume will continue to be useful.

DOUGLAS WILKERSON

■ Douglas Wilkerson teaches at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Images of Australia

100 Films of the New Australian Cinema

By Neil Rattigan. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991. $24.95 cloth; $12.95 paper.

Just when Australian films have all but disappeared from our local theaters, Neil Rattigan's book is now available to help us remember and explore the rich heritage of films from down under which have constituted the Australian film renaissance from 1970 to the present. Rattigan has selected 100 films (drawn from over 350) according to one or more of the following criteria: exploring Australian cultural myths of national identity; representating events in Australian history as well as contemporary Australian life; foregrounding the Australian landscape; contributing significantly to the New Australian Cinema at home and abroad.

This main section is prefaced by a short introduction to the industry itself, including a prehistory—Australia's flourishing silent and sound film industry prior to World War II—and an overview of various phases of industry development in the 1970s and 1980s. Rattigan also examines Australia's unique culture and history, from which he culled the dominant myths (the bush, the bushman, the pioneer, the Anzac legend, and the ocker) that provide an informative and engaging conceptual framework for the

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second section. The ocker is a uniquely Australian character; as Rattigan explains, he is "the archetypal uncultivated Australian workingman, a boorish uncouth chauvinistic Australian [who can exhibit] good humor, helpfulness and resourcefulness." It should also be noted that at least on one level, the ocker evolved in opposition to the British, Australia's initial historical mentor.

Rattigan also includes illuminating descriptions of many films not released theatrically in the United States which are critical to any study of Australian cinema in order to understand the diversity and development of the Australian product. For example, he includes Bruce Beresford's first feature, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972), a seminal ocker film about an Australian in England (which was inspired by the comic strip "Aussie in Pommieland"). Rattigan also discusses Peter Weir's first feature film, *The Cars That Ate Paris* (1974), which demonstrates a more cynical and roguish side of Weir: a bloodthirsty town that thrives on car crashes (a subject that also intrigued Dr. George Miller—as demonstrated in his first feature, *Mad Max*). I was also pleased to see that Rattigan includes selected works of John Duigan, who presents gritty social realism through carefully and sensitively drawn characters: the teenage runaways in *Mouth to Mouth* and a prostitute/drug addict in *Winter of Our Dreams*.

However, the sizable number of films that Rattigan has chosen and the subsequent space constraints in this 300-plus page book have unfortunately undermined his best intentions of covering almost 20 years of a national cinema. Perhaps this subject would have been better served with either longer analyses or fewer films. Rattigan thus could have gone beyond dramatic and character analysis and positioned the films more thoroughly in the larger historical and social context. For example, his discussion of Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *The Last Wave* could have taken into account Weir's delicate balancing of the mystical and the political. Accordingly, in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the sexual mysteries of the boarding school function in the context of its turn-of-the-century atmosphere—a direct reference to Federation, when Australia received a greater measure of independence from Mother England. Federation might well have served as another component of the dominant myths of Australian identity in Rattigan's introductory section, as many Australian films made in the 1970s, including *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith, My Brilliant Career, Breaker Morant*, and *The Getting of Wisdom*, are positioned in this critical period of Australian history. In various ways, the issues of race and gender are mirrored in the larger context of the Imperial British/Colonial Australian dynamic.

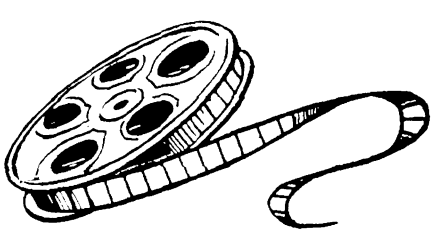
Rattigan could have made more of the American/Hollywood influence on the Australian industry and product, particularly in the 1980s. For after the advent of tax legislation that shifted the funding base away from the government and into the private sector via generous tax concessions (entitled "10BA"), film-makers looked to American models (and as Rattigan points out, American markets).

In fact, the incorporation of American genres and formulas during this period foregrounds one of the major ironies of the Australian renaissance (which Rattigan does not mention). This was an industry reborn in the wake of a bold nationalistic spirit in the 1960s as a generation of young adults joined a large contingent of activists to vehemently resist the imperial American yoke. One of the many bones of contention—which included, of course, the Vietnam War—was the predominance of American television programs on Australian networks (while American films monopolized Australian screens).This burst of nationalism fueled the inception of a native film industry supported by government grants in the early 1970s. Yet a decade later, economic factors dramatically altered the "cottage industry," and it conformed to American models. Since the late 1980s the American connection has proven to be a double bind: profit-conscious American distributors have become increasingly cautious (some would say xenophobic) about foreign pick-ups, and, ironically, Australian films are regarded as "foreign." The Australian film industry has been further impaired by the phasing out of 10BA four years ago, which dramatically diminished the economic base and the subsequent number of productions.

I missed some recent releases (and admitted personal favorites). Bill Bennett's *Backlash* is a wry contemporary examination of Aboriginal/white tensions. Jane Campion and Gillian Armstrong explore modern dysfunctional families from strong feminist perspectives in *Sweetie* and *High Tide* (respectively). Michael Thornhill boldly challenges homophobic Australia in *The Everlasting Secret Family,* which features a secret homosexual sect. In summation, *Images of Australia* serves as a useful introduction to the Australian Cinema, but Rattigan's conceptualization and scope have left some gaps.

SUSAN BARBER

■ Susan Barber teaches at Loyola Marymount University and is writing a book on Australian cinema.



Filming the Boer War

Volume 4 of The Beginnings of the Cinema in England, 1894–1901

By John Barnes. London: Bishopgate Press, 1992.

Significant work in the field of pre-classical cinema continues to appear at a brisk pace, with John Barnes now providing the fourth installment of his projected six-volume history of British cinema through 1901. Like its predecessors, this book is written for people who already command a firm grasp of the cinema's first decade. It offers an impressive, diligently gathered array of facts and information about British film practice during the year 1899.

Barnes's well-illustrated, meticulously footnoted series takes the kind of work done by Rachael Low and Roger Manvell in their *History of British Cinema, 1896–1906* to a new level of specificity and accuracy, and it has become an essential resource for anyone seriously interested in early motion pictures. However, readers should beware: this is history done in extreme close-up—context, narrative coherence, and broad analysis are often sacrificed to detail. Barnes also takes a one-year/one-volume approach that chops up his subject: part of the Boer War is covered in this volume, part will appear in volume 5.

Though firmly focused on the British cinema, *Filming the Boer War* invites us to reflect on the similarities and differences among national motion-picture practices in this era. British film-makers responded to the Boer War in a way that paralleled their American counterparts during the 1898 Spanish-American War. In both instances, film companies provided a visual newspaper and sought to arouse patriotic fervor in their audiences. The connection here is quite explicit, since the Biograph organization led the way each time. On both occasions, a small band of intrepid cameramen accompanied troops to the war zone but succeeded only in taking scenes of camp life, marching troops, and the like. Scenes of actual warfare were typically staged at home, in an effort to meet demands for more dramatic images.

The differences between British and American industries, however, prove at least as significant, though not always so obvious. American exhibitors who had established permanent venues in vaudeville theaters by 1899—companies such as Lubin, Vitagraph, Selig, and Biograph—became the basis for important nickelodeon-era production companies. Although the United Kingdom boasted several large exhibition concerns which regularly appeared in equivalent music halls during 1899, none went on to play similar roles. (The British Mutoscope & Biograph Company closed around 1904.) As Barnes shows quite clearly, British production in the late 1890s was much more firmly based in a genteel, lantern-show tradition.

At least in part because the British industry was spared lawsuits over patent infringements, film-making was much more decentralized than in the United States (or even France). Barnes suggests that this fostered a period of tremendous creativity. Certainly the United States failed to develop an accomplished film-maker in the style of England's G. A. Smith, perhaps because profits went to deflect lawsuits rather than into future production.

Barnes is at his best and most thorough when it comes to the identification and description of motion-picture equipment. Here he seems to be "definitive"—to use that forbidden word. And although he leaves historians of British cinema with much to explore in terms of reception, ideology, and overall analytic interpretation, and barely touches on the relationships between cinema and various forms of popular culture (excepting photography and the magic lantern), Barnes' excellent filmographic research will require many of us to make at least modest corrections in our published work. (In the United States, *Filming the Boer War* and other volumes in this series are available through ISBS, 5602 N.E. Hassalo St., Portland, Oregon 97213–3640.)

CHARLES MUSSER

■ Charles Musser is Assistant Professor of American Studies and Film Studies at Yale University.

Film Study

An Analytical Bibliography

By Frank Manchel. 4 vols. Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 1990. $55.00 per volume.

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